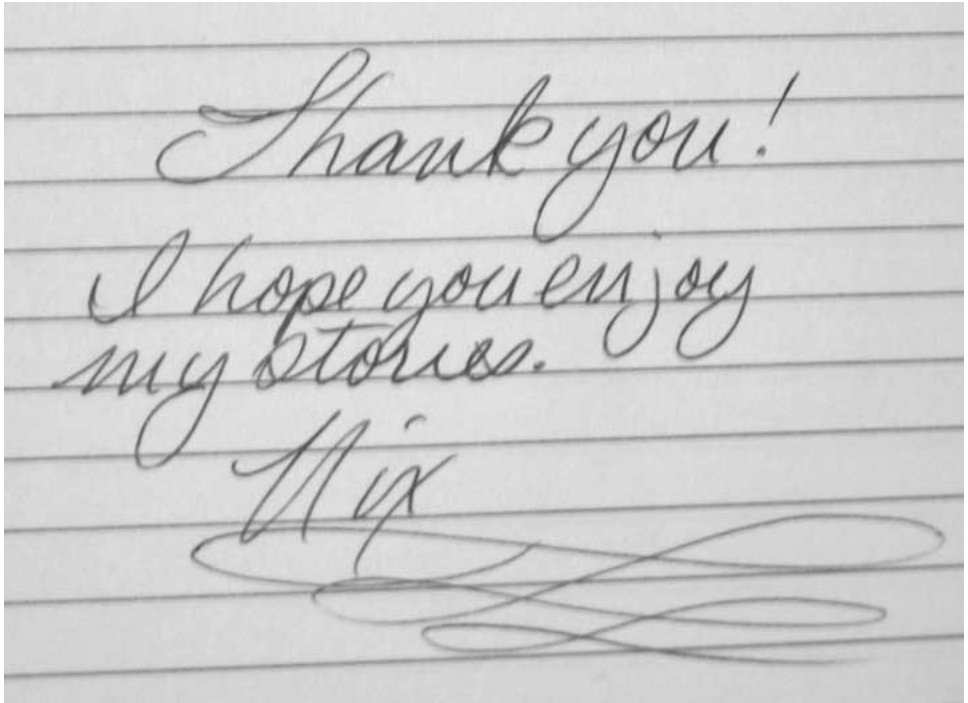


# The Theater of Emerald Tears

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For

London

Peace and hope are actions we take each day.

## Chapter One

*A little before midnight, early November, 1933*

Jimmy 'Irish' De Luca's fingers caressed the steering wheel, lightly, so lightly over the smooth black leather. Not much more than a shadow himself, hidden by trees and shadow, dark hair, dark car, he imagined himself like a panther, waiting to strike down the hill when he got the signal.

His Pop had owned a pub in Jersey and his Pop would never had turned to rum running. Then his Pop had said that Thomas Jefferson wouldn't have respected this law and neither was he. Jimmy thought about that the warmth of the big fireplace and the heat of the discussions in his father's pub often when he was waiting, engine cooling, waiting for the flash of light that would tell him to cross back into New York. Neither his Irish blood nor his Italian spirit was much good at waiting. The American in him wasn't real keen on joining his Pop in prison though. His Ma'd kill him, if she ever found out. She'd kill him if she knew the money he gave her came from rum and whiskey slipped over the Canadian border too. There were a lot of things she'd have his head for. And still he waited.

No moon rose over the river at the bottom of the hill. Moonless night, and yet he could replay the route in his head so cleanly that he wondered sometimes if he'd been here before this life, if he'd been an Indian running through these forests. Too dark to read, his book lay on the floorboards of the passenger side. James Fenimore Cooper, Indians and men being men, running, racing, fighting, winning. Lively ideas for a man who would have been a teacher, if his Pop hadn't gone to prison for a bit of rum and a loud mouth. The summer his Pop's pub had burned, Jimmy had just graduated from Fordham University. That was fourteen years ago and he never got a teaching job, so his students were coppers that couldn't catch him.

Light flashed and his mental history taking ended. He turned the key in the ignition, keenly aware of the deep rumble of his engine, perfect metal and oil and metal, precision power. He could outrun anything, not because he outran, but he just didn't get noticed.

Gravel crunched under tires, unconsciously he leaned a little closer to the wheel as the car picked up speed towards the river. No gas, not yet,

just roll down the hill, no lights, ten grand of booze in the boot, he was Hawkeye, racing through the woods. One hand on the wheel, one on the stick shift knob, feet making love to the petals, he was doing at least fifty when he hit the bridge. Once inside the covered bridge, he gave his baby a little gas and came out the American side doing sixty on a straight away. Farmington was a little over thirty miles away, a little nowhere town where he'd get gas and some breakfast, before heading towards the city with his booze. Biagotti didn't expect the load for another two days, so he had some time if he ran into trouble, but Biagotti also paid a bonus if he got his product early.

Leaning back now, hands light on the wheel, he laid into the gas. He was thinking biscuits and gravy, a couple poached eggs, and coffee when the hair stood up on the back of his neck. A black car showed in his rear view mirror, silent and as hard to see as Death on All Hallow's. Jimmy cursed his Irish ancestors. It was always their fault. The black Nash rolled out onto the road without engine. It was the perfect place for a little piracy, thirty miles till Farmington, no cops, and a large creek to slow down the unwary. Jimmy was gonna bet the bridge was blocked. Biagotti paid in bullets if you lost your load too. He could just imagine the Banshee wailing his name. "Not tonight my lovely Irish," he purred.

Headlights flashed on the Nash. It and its twin, who was farther down the road than the first, broke their silence, roaring onto the road after him. Eighty was about as much as Jimmy's Alfa Romeo could pull, especially loaded like it was. Against cops, that would have been enough. Against bullets, maybe not.

Glass shattered over the cases in his back seat, over the front seat. Blood flowered up against the dark wool of his sweater. He swerved, fish tailed, didn't feel a thing from the glass in his arm. "Bastards," he screamed, the word tinted with his mother's Irish rage and accent.

He didn't have any firearms. He didn't have a second driver to fire them anyway. What he did have was an alternative path home. Teachers weren't supposed to run run, but they weren't stupid when they did. Another bullet went through his car, through the passenger seat, out the floorboards to kick up the gravel below.

"Ya blighting bastards!" he screamed, turning onto a side road that hardly counted as more than mostly flat field. His car took the rougher

road easily and he pulled forward of his pursuers, who at the least may not know the route he was now on.

They followed, both of them, pumping lead like it could put out the fire of his escape. He leaned forward, hands strangling the wheel, bottles clicked as the back end caught a bump. He laid on the horn, startling late turkeys from the brush. Bullets took out his side mirror. Sweat ran down his back and the car flew over the last hill, tires spinning and he hammered the brakes on the downhill. Break pads screamed against wheels. Sparks flew.

His personal ferry, little better than a fancy raft, waited for him, held where it was supposed to be. The boy he'd paid to be there had eyes with so much white showing Jimmy thought he could see them with a good fifty feet to go.

So much for planning, he thought, his life resting on the brake pads, on the balance of inertia and sheer will power. He lived to cheat the Banshee. Cars behind him flew over the hill too, but didn't know enough to slow. Jimmy's Alfa Romeo screeched onto the ferry, fishtailing only a little as the ferry shoved off hard and fast. The pirates hit the drink, engines frying steam in the creek. His accomplice lay flat on the raft, shoving hard with the pole as they crossed. Jimmy's pursuers screamed and cursed. Even lead couldn't do the work of the devil now.

On the other side, the boy slipped into the passenger side and Jimmy threw the Romeo into gear, splashed as they hit the other side and dug their way up the little hill. At the top, Jimmy stepped out, too exhilarated to even notice that his arm was bleeding, and waved to the six men stuck with so much scrap metal for cars. Too bad about the Nashes. Jimmy did like those cars. "Bye boys!"

Jimmy 'Irish' De Luca did not lose his loads to goons like those!

## Chapter Two

The tip of Sunny's finger lingered on the ten thousand bead, pushing it up, pushing it back down the rung. The weekly transfer to the Canadian bank fluctuated between 30,000 and 40,000 as the abacus bead rose and fell. Sunny's mind was worlds away, wondering if the money he'd sent to Seattle had gotten there, if the papers proving he owned the theater were even at that moment riding a train towards him. Sunny Diamond had bet all his money on a theater he'd never seen. It was going to be his Theater of Emerald Tears.

Nothing would really change when the papers arrived, not right away. He'd take the big envelope from the mail, let himself run his thumb over the stamp, then he'd take the key on his watch-chain from his pocket and open the drawer.

The envelope with deed to his theater would slide into that drawer, under the false bottom with the newspaper clipping of Valentino, the letter from his mother, and a jade prayer bracelet a girl from India had sent him. The deed to his theater would rest there, until he figured out the rest of the solution. It was 1933, but his real life was that he belonged to Marko Biagotti.

Biagotti would dust him flat if he tried to leave, but if Sunny had faith in anything it was his own ability to think his way out of a jam.

"Hey Sunny," Biagotti's voice suddenly colored the small office like the scent of burned coffee. "That bead polished enough yet?"

Sunny's cheeks felt like they could have burned coffee. Biagotti stood in the doorway, elegant as a sawed off shotgun with an ivory handle, a short man with pock marks and snake eyes.

Right next to him stood a man with hair so dark Sunny thought there could be stars hiding in the disorder and eyes like emeralds. Sunny's hands disappeared under the desk.

"Hello, Mr. Biagotti," Sunny said, but he was watching the man standing next to his boss.

Dark green eyes, a tie only half done, hands in his pockets, the man grinned, looking Sunny in the eyes. Sunny smiled back, forgetting to politely look downward. The man rocked back on his heels, winked, and

Sunny's cheeks caught fire. He broke eye contact, one foot tapping nervously under his desk.

It was like something Sunny imagined in a movie, but feeling electric jumping between him and this green eyed man had never happened when he was watching a movie. Just to see if that feeling was real, he looked back up, telling himself he just wanted to see what color those eyes really were. The man was still smiling, smiling right at Sunny. Sunny's smile twitched, unsure of itself, but irrepressible anyway.

Biagotti laughed. "Well, blow me over! I thought my little number dragon was a monk!"

The dark haired man shoved his hands further into his pockets. "We just interrupted him, ain't that so?"

Sunny panicked. Homosexual. Sunny knew what happened to Oscar Wilde. "Mr. Biagotti, how may I help you? All of the receipts are recorded."

"Well, ain't that nice," Biagotti said, sitting down on Sunny's desk. He put two fingers under Sunny's chin and forced him to look up. "Sunny, this here is 'Irish' De Luca. He showed up a whole crew of 'Babyface' Randall's boys. I was going to take him out to the Wild Fire tonight, but I got this idea maybe he'd like to spend sometime with you instead. He's as pretty as a girl, ain't he?" Biagotti asked Irish.

Sunny closed his eyes, thinking he'd just keep them that way forever, but they opened on their own. Maybe he needed to see the disgust he feared on Irish's face. There was anger on that face, neatly masked under apathy. Sunny thought he would have missed it if their eyes hadn't locked for a lightning moment.

"He is the most beautiful person I've ever seen," Irish said, "Like a prince from a mythical land, he glitters and shines."

Now Sunny was really going to die. He was a homosexual who sparkled like a mythical prince, yeah, gonna die now. Sunny could just see Wild Bill Hickock leaning against Sunny's gravestone, because he knew he was going to die from this. Just going to curl up now. The stone read, "Here lies Sunny Diamond, who was as masculine as a tea cup." Yeah, men everywhere were holding their manhood's cheap.

"Yeah? Well don't get any ideas about keeping him," Biagotti said as he patted Sunny's cheek, "He belongs to me, don't you, Sunny boy. Irish was a teacher, back before he went to work for me, weren't you, Irish?"

"I would have been a teacher," Irish corrected, straightening a little, as if maybe some of his old professors could see him now, somehow.

"So you want to spend some time with my number dragon, or not?" Biagotti asked, smug.

"I am your accountant, Mr. Biagotti. And I do a good job for you," Sunny said, moving away from the hand on his cheek. "I take care of all your money.

"Yeah, real good too. It's best to get them young, train'em the way you want them. The chinks are best too, especially for number work."

Sunny didn't realize how intently he watched Jimmy De Luca. His overactive imagination translated the glint in those dark green eyes, the dark hair that seemed to stand on end a bit, Sunny's imagination laid the image of the Irish devil over the handsome dark haired man. It was a romantic image of a trickster god in Sunny's mind as Irish leaned against the other side of his desk, hands still in his pockets as he looked back over his shoulder and smiled at Sunny again. "I'll take good care of him."

"I can't go out today," Sunny said suddenly. "I have to wait for the mail."

Irish's smile went guarded. "I don't want to gum nothing up."

"Bullshit," Biagotti snorted. "Sunny, get out of the office. Show Jimmy here a good time. The mail will wait until tomorrow."

Sunny nodded curtly, stood, took his jacket from the back of his chair. "Yes Mr. Biagotti."

"Don't be a goon, De Luca," Biagotti said. "You take good care of my number dragon now. Git. Out. Don't worry about the car or the mail. Don't go no place public. People know he's mine and I don't want them getting any funny ideas."

Face pale, even after all the blush, Sunny nodded. "Yes, Mr. Biagotti."

The awkward moment turned into a few of them back to back as two angry confused men walked down a New York street in the sun light. The electricity had fizzled down to an irritating itch that Sunny didn't think would ever get scratched.

Jimmy cleared his throat. Sunny looked up from the sidewalk.

"You like books," Jimmy asked.

"Yeah," Sunny said, surprised. "Why?"

"I was thinking we could go to the library, if you like. That ain't really public. No one goes there, no one important."

Sunny's smile sneaked back, just a little late summer lightning. "Sure. You really were a teacher?"

"Would have been," Irish said.

"It's America," Sunny said, feeling like the sun was maybe going to rise in his soul. "Anything's possible, right?"

Irish paused, turned to look at Sunny, grinned crookedly. "I imagine that's so."

That electric was back, in full force with all the weight of nature behind it.

## Chapter Three

Randall enjoyed clean pistols. He spun the barrel of his pistol, enjoying the smooth mechanical sound of it. Everything smooth, neat, in its place. Randall had plans. Plans needed money and occasionally plans could accommodate the desire to grind a rival into the dust. Pleasure was very nice element of being powerful.

The drivers who'd failed to take Irish De Luca's load sat on a church pew at the side of Randall's office. He hoped they were praying. The man he'd put in charge of that mission lay on the floor in front of them, on a double layer of oiled canvas. Randall did not enjoy blood on his floor. "Now."

Both of the drivers looked up at him. He thought they looked like ghosts already, and wouldn't cost him much to make them both that way. He didn't really want to carry out any bodies on his own. "Now. Two of my cars lost. I've had to kill one of my favorite drivers. We need to get Biagotti's attention, not pat him on the back."

Randall set his pistol down and picked up the Chinese puzzle box that his European partner had brought him. In the harbor there was a shipload of booze, good booze. "This box is an excellent example. We will never open it without destroying it. We have to bring Biagotti down with destroying his business. Otherwise, we'll never get the prize inside."

"What if we could take something of his, something of his that could open that box?" Maynard asked, refusing to think about the dead guy on the floor only two paces from where he sat.

"How do you propose we do that," Randall asked, fingering his box.

"Biagotti's accountant is Chinese. He manages all the books and without him, if Biagotti lost him, he'd look like a fool. The Chinaman could read that box and open it for you though."

The guy next to Maynard stayed real quiet. Randall's smile grew and the quiet guy thought he looked just like the devil himself. "That is an interesting proposition. I'll give you till tomorrow midnight to have that Chinaman here. Make it look bad for Biagotti, and I'll forgive you your past mistakes. Fail me and you can beg forgiveness from God directly. Now. Out. Both of you. And take your friend with you."

It wasn't a bad deal. They could trade one skinny little china boy for a clean slate, maybe even some points. Only problem was that Sunny wasn't Chinese.

## Chapter Four

Sunny watched Irish browse down an aisle of poetry. Irish's cuffs were rolled back, which interested Sunny very much. That Biagotti expected him to show Irish a good time generated resentment and outrage that warred with his desire to do just exactly that.

Movies weren't about homosexual couples though and he didn't know how this was supposed to go. Maybe Irish wasn't homosexual. The word itself echoed around in his thoughts like a curse gone astray that wasn't quite sure what kind of outcome it would have. On one hand, everyone knew homosexuals were depraved exiles from God, sinners on the level with murderers and defilers of all sorts. On the other hand, the outcome was deciding everyone was wrong. Maybe God had abandoned him before he was born because his father hadn't married his mother. His grandmother had expressed that opinion when she looked at him, or spoke to him.

But if he believed in God, and that word homosexual stuck to him, then he had to trust that God was smarter than his grandmother, smarter than Biagotti, smart enough to not make things he'd hate.

"Penny for your thought," Irish asked, his voice rich like melted butter on a caramel bun. That voice alone made Sunny's stomach tighten up, made his blood go places that it oughtn't go.

"I was just thinking about Oscar Wilde," Sunny lied, a vulnerable lie that hinted at the truth. "Do you like Oscar Wilde?"

"I liked 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', but the one about being in prison was a little too dour for my tastes," Irish said, a smile hopefully softening the academia that could come over him. "Did you know that Richard the Lionhearted was said to travel with a blond minstrel that he was never parted with."

Sunny's eyes went wide and he sort of rolled around the end of the aisle, moving closer as if they were sharing this great secret. "Do you think they were homosexual?"

Irish shrugged, turned to lean his shoulder against the bookshelf, arms across his chest. He washed his upper lip between his teeth, tilted his head a little the other way. "And if they were? Maybe they were happy that way."

Sunny's fingers laced behind his back. "Maybe they were. Do you think God hated them for it?"

"Well," Irish said, leaning forward just a little, hands moving back to his pockets, "If God hated Richard, he had plenty of other reasons. Do you know what he did at Acre?"

"Where's Acre," Sunny asked, moving another step closer.

"It's a town in Galilee." Irish pulled a hand from a pocket and reached very slowly out to Sunny's cheek, giving the guy every chance to pull away.

Heart pounding so loud he was sure they could hear it all the way in Galilee, Sunny leaned a little into the touch. "I thought that town was made up, like in the Bible."

Finger tips to cheek, the electric Sunny'd felt like velvet now, like his whole self was alive for the first time, like it was a spring morning with warm sunlight when he hadn't known winter would end. "Are you homosexual," he whispered.

"I don't really know," Irish replied, now close enough that his breath brushed Sunny's lips. "I haven't ever felt like the poems were talking about something real till I saw you. Can I kiss you?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," Sunny said, eyes wide as train lights in a subway tunnel. "Kiss me."

Their lips meet, noses bumped. Sunny realized the reason the man in the movies always put his arm around the girl was because she was likely light headed from his kiss, because he knew he was a little light headed. So he stepped closer and reached for Irish's hand.

Irish got the idea and slipped an arm around Sunny's back, pulling him close. Their bodies were like twirling magnets, pulling together until certain undeniable hardnesses propelled them back away from each other again, then closer. Irish settled it with an arm around Sunny's back and fingers in his hair, and a kiss that made sure to take the virginity of Sunny's mouth.

Sunny rose up on the balls of his feet. Tongue dancing with Irish's with a harmony that felt like two puzzle pieces fitting together.

The sharp clap of a book closing behind them brought them both out of the heaven they'd found. Sunny looked around Irish and Irish turned to

find the head librarian standing there with a large book in her hands. Irish smiled a devilish Irish smile. "Good afternoon, Miss Martha."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Irish. Perhaps you'd care to show your friend around your favorite books at your home?"

Irish slipped an arm around Sunny's shoulders. "Now that sounds like a splendid idea. Miss Martha always has the best suggestions."

The compliment didn't really cure her narrowed eyes and the angry tilt of her eyebrows. "Be that as it may, we do not encourage kissing in the library."

"Come on, Sunny. Let's go find some lunch," Irish said, but he stopped in front of Mrs. Martha, caught her hand and kissed the back of it. The slightly older woman blushed, studying the ceiling suddenly.

"Don't you flirt with me, Mr. Irish. I know you for what you are, scoundrel," she said, but the tone was affectionate now, not angry.

"Yes, I am a scoundrel first rate," he said, walking backwards, dragging a slightly dazed Sunny along by the sleeve. "Incorrigible, beyond hope, a literary corsair, so Sunny should be aware of what you're getting yourself into, shouldn't he Miss Martha?"

"Yes, he should," she said, holding the book to her chest. "Alas, when shot by Cupid's arrows, few people can resist your charms, you corsair, you."

Irish laughed and blew her a kiss before dashing for the doors. Sunny ran to keep up and they both got evil stares from other patrons.

Outside the sun felt warm, even for November and Irish hailed them a cab. "Isn't Mrs. Martha just tops," he asked Sunny.

Sunny turned to face him, one knee up on the back seat. "Is she your girlfriend?"

Irish rolled his eyes and laughed. "Told you, there was no one before you. I'm behind. Come home with me?"

The driver glared in the mirror at them. Irish gave him that smile, the one that made Sunny think he was in a car with an old Irish god.

Both hands in his lap, Sunny looked down at the seat, then back up with habitual shyness. "I'd love to see your collection of books."

The cab took them to Irish's small brownstone. The electric between them took them to places that poetry starts in.

## Chapter Five

Sunny followed Irish into the small brownstone, fingers laced behind his back. "Is this your family's home?"

"No. All mine. One good thing about what I do is the money. My father owned a pub in Jersey." Irish hung up his coat and disappeared into a narrow hall by the stairs. "Come on, I'll make some lunch. And I'll get you a cold beer."

That was some statement. Sunny lifted his chin and followed into the dark hall, and into the large kitchen behind. Clean white counters, one copper pot, no curtains over the window, and the kitchen was completely redeemed by the small white cabinet with a round bit on the top. Sunny didn't really believe it was a mechanical icebox. Those were highly expensive. "I don't really drink beer."

"How am I supposed to get you drunk enough to take advantage of you then," Irish teased, opening the box himself and taking out an illegal brown bottle. "Do you want some tea or some hot chocolate? How about a ham sandwich? Have you known you were homosexual long?"

"A ham sandwich sounds nice," Sunny said, sitting down at the big wooden table, wishing for a moment he had his abacus, something to be interested in other than answering the question. "Maybe I'm not homosexual."

That was the taboo word of the day. Homosexual. "Maybe I'm not a fagot."

Irish froze and Sunny watched him take a deep breath, shoulders rising, holding, then releasing. "Do you know where that word came from?"

"It's French?"

"Yes, it is. It means 'bundle of sticks'."

"Why were homosexuals called fagots?" Sunny asked. "Don't they call cigarettes the same?"

"Yes." Irish set the pan of ham down on the counter and focused on slicing for a couple of minutes. "It's because when they burned witches, they tied homosexual men together like bundles of sticks and used them on the pyre. They were fagots."

"Oh," Sunny said, eyes wide. His mind conjured up images of Irish and he bound together. Homosexual didn't seem like such a bad word now. "I wouldn't want to be a fagot."

Irish laughed. "I've got mustard? That okay? Or horseradish? And don't worry. I don't think God hates us quite that badly anymore."

"Mustard please. I think I'll be Buddhist. I went to a Catholic school before my grandmother sent me to apprentice to Mr. Biagotti's old accountant, and Sister Margaret said that I was probably Buddhist because I'm half Japanese. Are you Catholic?"

"No. I'm atheist. I think if there were a God," Irish paused, carefully sliced some dark brown bread and smeared it with mustard. Then he took a long drink of his beer. "My brother's a priest."

It had all been so much easier when they were kissing, Sunny thought. Talking about it made it seem... ugly, dangerous, bad. "What if we pretend I'm a girl. I look like a girl. My real name's Daisuki. That could be a girl name. Then it would be okay if we felt all jittery when we looked at each other."

"It's okay if you're a boy and I'm a boy too." Irish said firmly, setting the plate down in front of Sunny. "I mean, if you were a girl, I wouldn't be attracted to you anymore than I have been to any of the other girls I've known. I like you how you are. You want me to kiss you again?"

Sunny ran his finger along the edge of the brown bread, deeply interested in the surprising softness of it. "Yes, I want you to kiss me again," Sunny said, lacing his fingers over the top of his head. "That was tops! If I was a girl, I could get pregnant and you'd have to marry me. Biagotti wouldn't mind if we got married if I was a girl."

Irish stood, leaned over the table. "But I don't care what Biagotti thinks or wants."

Sunny rose out of his chair and their noses hit. Irish caught Sunny's head, tilted it a little and kissed him like it was the only day he'd ever be able to kiss him, like God was going to strike them dead in the next minute. Hungry, like potted flowers on a window sill, feeling rain for the first time, they poured into each other.

The sandwich stayed on the table as Irish came around and pulled Sunny to him. Sunny was small enough to be a girl. If they'd been drunk, there would have been an excuse, permission. Love was an excuse, in all

the dime novels, the girl falls in love with the boy, he with her, and there is an excuse. With them, maybe the excuse was that there might not be a tomorrow, there might not be another chance, another attraction, another moment to be alive. And they became one flesh.

## Chapter Six

Irish woke first, Sunny's head on his shoulder, strands of dark silky hair laying over his lips. Making love had been everything and nothing like he'd thought it would be. Clumsy and painful and yet enough to make him see stars and cry out to God when they got it right, heaven, and then he suddenly understood the primal motivation of mankind. Love wasn't some poetry laying in a book somewhere, it was this need to connect with another, to blend bodies and souls and the hope of life was that they'd never go away. He felt stupid then, as he tightened an arm around Sunny's sleeping body, holding him close as if he could protect him from the coming day.

Only virginal school girls felt like that, like being with this other person was the answer to every question a person hadn't even thought up to ask.

Irish ran run and every time he went out, there was always a chance he wouldn't come back. He'd sat down and calculated the odds once. That'd he'd been running for years, they were only stacking the odds against him. And he couldn't say he'd really cared all that much. It was the grace and power of it, the victory of cheating lead the way his father hadn't. Since the day they'd arrested his father, and the pub had burned, Irish realized, he'd been running from that kind of end for himself, from facing the loss of what he'd valued in his life.

Odds and outcomes ran through his mind like the clicking sound of an adding machine. Biagotti had given Sunny to him as a reward, just for a day, and rewards can be taken. Rewards can be given to someone else. Rewards are property. Thinking that even Sunny saw himself that way made Irish angry, not at Sunny, but at the whole world, at a world that thought it had the right to decide for everyone.

As if the world had suddenly righted itself, after years of being upside down, Irish wanted to go back to teaching. He wanted to leave New York and Manhattan and all the money he threw away here. He wanted books and pot roast and to have this man in his arms safe with him. "Sunny," he said, nudging the sleeping man gently.

"Um?" he said, still sleeping, still safe in dreams.

"Do you like working for Biagotti?"

"OH! Oh! Work! I wasn't supposed to stay! OH no!" Sunny was out of bed, stumbling with the sheet wrapped around skinny bare legs. "He's going to beat the crap out of me! Oh, God!"

"Wait," Irish said, reaching out to catch a fluttering hand. For just a moment, he wondered... he didn't really know Sunny. There were so many things that could go wrong, so many consequences that he hadn't thought through. For just a second it was like he was waiting to make the final run back into New York. "Sunny. Stop. Don't go back there so he can give you to someone else. Come with me. Let's go to Seattle. I was offered a teaching job there a few months ago. It's waiting for me. Let's just buy a car and go."

"Go to Seattle? Just go?"

"Yeah. Let's just go make new lives."

"New lives?" Sunny had never thought of that. Just leave? Leave with a man he'd just met? Homosexual, half-Japanese bastard... Sunny couldn't think of anything good to label himself, even after the warmth and pleasure of spending the night in Irish's arms.

It wasn't that Sunny was a coward, but that he was more methodical. He'd saved for years for his theater, planned his escape for over a decade. "I own a theater in Seattle. I'm waiting for the deed to come. If it comes today, I'll go with you tonight. Then we'll have all night to drive before Biagotti starts to look for us."

"So you will go with me? It wouldn't matter that we're homosexual, not in Seattle," Irish said, following Sunny out of bed. "In Seattle, everything will be new and I'll court you properly, take you to dinner, read you poetry!"

Sunny blushed, pausing as he buttoned his shirt. "Will you sit in the movie theater with me? Hold my hand?"

"Without a doubt," Irish said, moving closer to button Sunny's shirt for him. "I might even try to kiss you again."

"This is too wonderful, too happy. It's like a movie," Sunny said, stepping back to tuck in his shirt. "What about your house?"

"I'll have my solicitor sell it and send the money. Sunny, I know this is fast, but the world moves like that sometimes. If you don't take an opportunity it can slip away."

"But what if you take the wrong one? What if you chose and it's the wrong choice?"

Irish raked hair back, rubbed his neck. "You don't have any doubts about me. I'd see them in your eyes if you did."

"But," Sunny said, tucking his shirt into pants hastily put on, "But what if you decide you don't, what if you have doubts?"

"I'm not asking you to marry me, not today. Just to get out of here. You're not safe here and I'm tired of being here. I want something new. And so do you."

"I do," Sunny said, thinking about marriage, about commitments he never thought he'd get to make. "I do. I do want something new, something clean and safe."

Sunny was still thinking about that, about marriage and some place new when he unlocked his office and let himself in. Even though he was late, he was still earlier than most of the employees who had more direct contact with the business. They worked late though, with security and speak easies.

"You're late. Did you give him a good time," Biagotti asked, feet up on Sunny's desk.

"I'm sorry," Sunny replied, fear like a primal guardian spirit rising around him. "We went to the library and then we went to his house. I will have all the receipts done on time."

"I understand," Biagotti said, so reasonable, almost friendly. "You were just being a good whore like I told you too. Nothing wrong with doing what you're told."

Sunny hung his coat on the hook by the door. "Do you want me to get to work?"

"Yeah," Biagotti said. "But some mail came yesterday and I thought you might tell me about it."

"Mail?" His deed. Sunny tucked his fingers under his arms.

"Mail," the thick white envelope skidded across Sunny's desk and he knew, even before seeing that it was addressed to him that it was his deed, and that it was opened. "It's an investment, just an investment. I'm real careful with my money, Mr. Biagotti, and with yours."

"An investment? You lying little fag," Biagotti snarled. "You're thinking about running away, but I own you. I paid good money to get you

and you ain't got no where to go, no matter what you think. No one wants a little cocksucker Jap around. You oughta be on your knees thanking me for protecting your perverted ass."

Holding the deed close, Sunny watched the floor, wondering how long Biagotti would yell and what he'd need to do to calm him. "I wouldn't leave you, Mr. Biagotti! Not never." It was the first lie that Sunny had ever told. "The theater is just an investment. Movies are going to be big!"

Biagotti stood, put out his cigar. Sunny thought it was over, so simple. It wasn't.

## Chapter Seven

Irish leaned over the open hood, looking at the engine. It wasn't as nice as his Romeo. It wasn't as fast, but the Romeo wasn't going to be out of the shop for another week, Biagotti was paying for the repairs, so he'd surely know if it was picked up early. This Nash would do.

"The suspension is reinforced," the sales man said, hair slicked back, a pencil behind one ear. "For special jobs."

When the car salesmen knew what a guy did for a living, it was time to get out of town. "Can you get me plates by lunch time?"

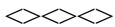
"Can you get me cash by lunch time?" The salesman caressed the front end of the hood, like the car was a beautiful woman.

The movement made Irish's stomach tighten, made him think of the way Biagotti had treated Sunny. "I got the cash. I want better tires though. I got an important special job and I don't want nothing gumming it up."

"You leave that to me, Mr. Irish! I'll take good care of you. I'll have her all fueled up and ready to go by one o'clock sharp!"

One o'clock, Irish thought. One o'clock was a good time to be ready by. There wasn't much to pack, not much that he wanted. Just his books, some clothes, his favorite pens, and Sunny, that was all he could list that he didn't want to leave without.

It was so fast though, the change from gambling his life away one run at a time, out running odds because it was the best way to feel some meaning. To looking into Sunny's eyes and finding meaning in chasing the sunlight in those dark eyes, to the possibility of a whole new life far away. To teach again, Irish thought, it was like coming alive after a long winter.



Across town, Sunny sat on the floor behind his desk, shades down on the windows, smoke still drifting up from the metal trash can that had been the pyre for his theater. The deed to his theater smoldered with a used up note pad and some old letters. The world was like a story of sentences broken apart by flames, a word here, an idea there, punctuation lost, and Sunny sat adding Biagotti's numbers trying to sort out the real values behind black eyes. There was a pattern with Biagotti, like a dangerous

merry-go-round, ups and downs, round and round. No one would believe a pansy little Jap, let alone stand up to the powerful head of the Biagotti family. Biagotti killed people for sport and no one laid a finger on him.

Biagotti had taken legal guardianship of Sunny when Sunny was fifteen. He was twenty-three now and he knew how to do two things well; watch Biagotti's accounts and stay out of Biagotti's way. What he wanted to learn to do was get off the merry-go-round. He wanted to go to Seattle with Irish.

On the outside he looked very focused on his work, rows of numbers neatly written in, abacus clicking steadily away. On the inside a question chased an answer like a weasel after an egg rolling down hill. How did he get out of the building without drawing anymore of Biagotti's attention. Sunny hadn't looked at his face since Biagotti left his office, but he knew it was messed up enough that he'd have attention from the other people in the building. Pity, disgust, either way it would slow his exit from the building, or worse, someone would tell Biagotti that he was leaving.

Hiding, Sunny thought to himself, was another thing he was good at. As much as he wanted out of the building, he also wasn't sure when Irish would be ready to leave. Then it struck him, how much danger he was putting Irish in. Sunny closed his eyes and banished the demons of bruises away, told them that he didn't have time to feel them now. A swollen finger, fingerprints bruises, hurts that he wouldn't even face enough to acknowledge they hurt, these demons he banished. He would wait till the end of the day, not go out to get lunch at the diner, not draw attention to himself.

Clocks tick so much slower when each passing minute could reveal a demon that can't be banished. Near half after four, his door opened and he sat up straight, pencil moving steadily over numbers that he'd already written in hours before.

"You're coming to the club with me tonight," Biagotti said. "You look like shit, but I guess I'll have to live with it. Do you have any decent clothes?"

Sunny's mouth was dry, but he forced a slight smile. "I have nice clothes. I was saving them. Is it okay if I go home and dress?"

Sunny's whole world hung on the answer to that question, rocking like a tetter-totter in the wind.

"I suppose it'll have to be. I can't take you out looking like that, can I? You ought to take better care of yourself," Biagotti said, smirking. "I'll send a car for you. It'll be there at six for you. Don't be late."

Sunny closed the book, hoping the tremble in his fingers didn't show. "I'll be ready, Mr. Biagotti."

"You better be," Biagotti said, hand tight enough on the doorknob to make it creak, "I got someone I want you to meet. He's a friend of mine."

"Yes, Mr. Biagotti," Sunny said, standing with the thick account book held to his chest, arms across it. "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine."

"Damn right. Don't you forget that either, Fairy," Biagotti purred, snarled. Sunny couldn't tell if he were pleased or not. "Six o'clock."

Then he was gone and the room was entirely too bright. The only light was the setting autumn sun, but it was white as the aura of Christ to Sunny. Shaking, he put the account book down and opened his secret drawer. He quickly slipped the Valentino clipping into his mother's letter's envelope, those and the prayer bracelet slipped into his pants pocket.

He caressed the abacus, worn smooth from his fingers, the dark red beads his best companion for years and he thought. Goodbye. For a second, he thought of taking the abacus with him, tucking it under his arm and taking this piece of himself with him. And then he looked at the door, still cracked open where Biagotti had left it and thought about the open freedom of the road to Seattle.

The abacus stayed on his desk. The account book got locked in the drawer. He walked out like he was still the good little Japanese bastard accountant who was lucky to be there, when in fact he was now something else entirely. Free men are not made by paper or debts, but by the strength of their hearts.

## Chapter Eight

Sunny had walked to work, and from Irish's place that was farther than he could walk now. His back hurt. His face hurt. It hurt to walk. His hand hurt and the swelling told him that Biagotti had probably broken or at the least dislocated his little finger on his left hand. It was a shopping list of things he had to sort out in order to walk the fifteen blocks to his apartment, or to decide that he couldn't walk that far.

Adding figures was easy and they always came out the same if you did it right. People weren't so easy. People were unpredictable. People were unreliable. People were dangerous. What he'd had with Irish the night before had to have been a day dream, something patched together from wishes and movie caused day dreams. Movies. And he remembered his theater, his Theater of Emerald Tears. Just so much ashes now with no deed to prove he owned it.

The building smacked into his shoulder and he didn't know how he'd gotten over that far, or why the sidewalk was coming up towards him. Hand over his mouth to keep the grief back, to keep it silent, he rocked there on his knees, in a cold Autumn rain that promised snow before the end of the month. He wanted snow then, to fall down like angel feathers and cover him, to hide him from people who weren't as kind as numbers. He wanted a blanket of snow to settle over him and hide his pain from all the people that wouldn't care, who couldn't be bothered with one worthless little fagot bastard.

It wasn't snow though, just gray rain and it washed his face, washed dark from his shirt so that it ran down hill between his knees. Blood that only nature could clean away from wounds on his back that he hadn't had time or compassion enough for himself to care for. Tears stung the cuts by his eyes, stung his busted lip and he lifted his face to the rain so that it could wash those away as well.

Headlights shone in his face, drawing him back to the real world and the time that had gone by. How was he to just walk away and go to Seattle when he couldn't even hold onto his own theater? Hold onto a simple sheet of paper that represented his savings and hopes for fifteen years?

"Sunny?" A voice asked, unsure, muted by the rain. "Sunny? Oh my god. Sunny!"

He looked towards the voice, but saw only rain and gray cold. A coat, warmed by the man who'd just been wearing it wrapped around him, shielded him from the rain. "Irish?"

"How badly are you hurt? I'll get you to a hospital." Irish said, voice clearer now mellow like the welcome crackle of a fire. "I shouldn't have let you leave this morning."

"You were," Sunny asked, not really believe that he was being picked up. There shouldn't have been any arms strong enough to reach into the darkness after him. "You were looking for me?"

"Yes, I was looking for you," Irish said, holding Sunny close. "Where are you hurt?"

"He burned my deed. It came yesterday," Sunny said, dry sobs making him shake in Irish's arms. "He burned my theater!"

Irish opened the door to the new Nash and set Sunny in out of the rain. Tenderly he brushed strands of dark hair away from where the rain had stuck them. "He didn't burn your theater. The Theater of Emerald Tears is in Seattle waiting for you. Biagotti burned a piece of paper. We can get another."

Sunny bit his lip. Cold fingers reached out to touch Irish's warm cheek. "It's so far away."

"We'll be there in a week," Irish said, smiling like the smuggler he was. "This nash is brand new and once we have the engine broke in, we'll fly like bats out of the night! Are you hurt bad, Sunny?"

"No. He just slapped me around a little," Sunny said, refusing to believe it could be more than that. "Can we leave now? Tonight? Right now?"

"Do you want to get anything from your apartment?"

"No. He's going to send a car for me, to take me to a club. I can't go there. Let's just go, leave now." Sunny took hold of Irish's shirt, holding him close. "Can we go right now?"

"Yes, we can go right now. We'll get to Columbus before morning. Then we'll stop in a motel and you can wear some of my clothes. We'll get far away from here before we stop. You're not hurt inside, are you?" Irish touched Sunny's chest, then laid his palm against him, as if he could warm him with just will alone.

"I'm okay," Sunny said, smiling softly. "Let's go see my theater."

"Right o!" Irish stood, closed the door, winked.

## Chapter Nine

Maynard straightened the hat on his head. He was cleaned up from when he'd been at Randall's, he and his partner both. There were bad places to be in, and then there were worse. They'd been on Biagotti's payroll for nearly five years. They were still collecting for Biagotti. They were on the city of New York's payroll for just a little longer and the city gave them nice shiny badges to wear too. Now they were on Randall's payroll and while he didn't pay quite as well as the other too, oxygen was a very valuable commodity.

They just needed one little china boy to clean the slate with Randall and everything else would fall into place. Biagotti was old news, a dog with shaky teeth, and they'd both decided that standing with the bigger dog was the smarter choice. They just hadn't realized the bigger dog might bite harder.

Biagotti's chinaman's apartment had not been hard to find, nor break into. The problem had been that the chinaman hadn't been there. Which had lead to explorations about where he was. Irish De Luca was a complication.

There was something spooky about a man who could smuggle liquor for as many years as Irish and not get caught. There were rumors that he was fair folk, that he used magic, that he was some kind of witch. Maynard didn't believe in witchcraft and neither did Bose, but there wasn't much point in fighting two people if they just wanted the one. So they watched, and waited, and they lost the limping Chinese guy almost as soon as he'd left the office where he worked.

The both of them, the chinaman and the Irish demon, both of them were too lucky to be natural. "It gives me the goose bumps. They just aren't natural," Maynard said. "The little chink can't have got far."

Bose nodded and sat back. "We'll find him. From the way he was moving he wouldn't be any problem."

The rain started soon after. Everything was gray in the city then and it's easy to overlook flowers under the snow of the heart. They did however see Irish putting Sunny in the car. Neither Sunny nor Jimmy gave much thought to the cop car that passed them by, turned the next corner.

"How in the lap of Hell did that prick find him before we did?" Maynard cursed. "We're going to have to take them both."

"We're cursed," Bose sighed as the car pulled over. "Why does everything get jammed up?"

"Because we're not being big dogs," Maynard said calmly. "We're going to kill Irish De Luca and take the chinaman to Randall. Everything will be clean between us, Randall will kill Biagotti or his men when they come for their accountant, and everything will settle down. We'll be working for the boss of New York and everything will be like it used to be."

"I don't like Randall," Bose said, thinking about bodies on oiled canvas.

"Don't say that," Maynard said, hands milking the steering wheel.

"Don't let no body hear you say that. What we're going to do is follow them. When they get out of town, then we'll hit them hard. It'll be done. It'll be over. It's obvious they're leaving town. The only way to go is west. We'll wait for them on the Torencedale bridge."

"And if they don't go that way?" Bose wanted a drink, wanted so many of them he'd miss this whole night, wake up tomorrow and it would all be fine.

"If they don't," Maynard said, "then we will. Our lives ain't worth spit if we don't bring Biagotti's number man in."

"I want a drink."

"Me too. When it's done. We'll go get drunk."

## Chapter Ten

It was the easiest run Irish had ever done, leaving New York. He didn't know why the hair was standing up on the back of his neck.

They'd turned the heater on full blast and Sunny was just about dry. Irish wanted to kill Biagotti and the urge refreshed every time he caught a look at the delicate man sitting next to him. Sunny was like a violet kept in the attic, reaching for veils of sunlight between the cracks. Irish so easily saw the face from the night before, almond eyes full of trust and hope, lips soft as sweet tea on the tongue, laughter and little noises that probably couldn't be made by another mouth anywhere. Under the bruises, the swollen lips, that butterfly was there. "You're beautiful, so beautiful, poetic."

Sunny blushed, red under midnight purple. "Um, I look like a chew toy. I ache all over," he paused, looked out the window. "I'm weak."

"No, you're not," Irish said, stressing his words. He reached out to touch Sunny's hair, sooth drying black. "Look," said, pulling the car to the side of the road. They were under a bridge, with just the headlights to keep back the dark. "I've known weak men. They bite and claw and push others under to keep themselves from drowning. Weak people deny who they are and they don't walk away when they can, they live in lies so thick they can't see the prison, let alone the door. You are strong, Sunny Diamond. Daisuki Sony. You are brilliantly strong like the bright tropical bird hiding in the foliage, just waiting for it's moment to fly. I am so grateful that you didn't defend yourself this morning or fight a battle you couldn't have won. If he'd killed you this morning, I think I would have died too. I know I've only known you two days, and every logical part of my mind tells me I'm being a fool, but in the end a man has to live with his soul not what he thinks is logical."

Sunny didn't know what to say back, didn't know what to do about the sunlight prying open the last of his hiding place. Tears stung though and he was tired of them. "I don't feel strong, Irish. I feel small and pathetic. Maybe you see a guy who's a tropical bird, but I just see a guy with two black eyes and a busted finger. Do you really think I can still get my theater without the deed?"

"The deed was just a piece of paper. Your theater is a building that's waiting for you. And the black eyes will be gone by the time you have your opening ceremony. We'll get a great big neon sign, in bright green! It'll read, 'Theater of Emerald Tears', and the popcorn will be fresh and people will laugh and hold hands and there will be Valentino and Charlie Chan movies!"

"I want to buy a new hat," Sunny said and Irish grinned, ruffling dark hair.

"Then we'll stop in Chicago and buy new hats and a couple new suits, get our shoes shined. We'll pick up a book and take turns reading to each other."

"Might better get a couple of books, and maybe some paper and pencils," Sunny added, turning in his seat. "Maybe we could write poetry together."

Irish leaned closer, gentle and on Sunny's cheek as he drew him into a kiss, lips painting love over other lips, poetry without words. Love between souls that have traveled together through lives, love that knows its mate no matter the shape of life.

"Break it up!" A harsh voice snarled and followed it up the butt end of a billy club against Irish's window. "Yer parked illegally!"

Irish broke the kiss, pulling back slightly, smiling, eyes twinkling. "Best bird on the whole planet," he whispered.

Sunny saw the glint of light from the pistol barrel. He froze, eyes locked on it. "Gun," he whispered.

"What?" Irish asked, turning. Glass sprayed in over them, slicing and biting. Blood splattered from Irish and the billy club struck, shoulders, throat, the back of his head as he fell forward. Sunny screamed, threw himself as cover over Irish, holding his still warm love in his arms.

"No! Stop! Don't!" Sunny screamed. Heat soaked into him, hot and spreading. "Don't! He hasn't done anything!"

The cop reached in the ruined window and opened the door. Sunny held to Irish as if he could hold his spirit in his body, but the cop grabbed Sunny by the hair and jerked. When that didn't get the response he wanted, he got both hands on his shirt and forced him out, right over the top of Irish. Irish followed, limp and caught only by the road. Dark covered his chest, over his heart, shoulder, smeared on his face.

"Irish! Irish! No! Let me go! Let me go!"

Hand cuffs, thick iron bracelets were forced on.

Bose came around, looked at Irish. "I think you got him in the heart."

"Oughta put one between the eyes just to make sure."

"No! You leave him alone! Leave him alone!"

"Shut up, you stupid china doll," Maynard snarled. "I shot him already. You do the one to the head."

"I think one to the heart is enough," Bose said, nudging Irish with the toe of his boot. "He's dead alright. And you know the beauty?"

"What's that?" Maynard asked, dragging Sunny towards the patrol car.

"They're going to blame this on Biagotti. It's out all over town he's looking for his number man, and this guy. We're going to be in real good with Randall."

"Yeah! You're right." Maynard slapped Sunny, opened handed, but still hard enough to make his head spin. "Ain't that right, Chinaman?"

"I'm not Chinese! Please! Let me go!"

"Trunk?"

"Can you be quiet in the back?"

"Help! Help! Help me!" Sunny screamed, not think there was anyone even remotely close. He hadn't prayed to the Catholic God since he'd left school, and he didn't think it would be very helpful now, but it was all he could think of, "God, please help me! Please don't let Irish die! Please, God! Please, God."

"Trunk."

And shortly after Sunny found himself in the darkness of the trunk with nothing but tears and prayers. "God, help me! Please!"

Everyone knew God didn't help homosexuals or mobsters. Sunny prayed anyway.

## Chapter Eleven

Death was the cheapest commodity in New York. A person could get it for free. It was life that was expensive. Sunny had been paying for it for years. The coin was his pride. The coin was his freedom. Laying in the trunk of the car, he remembered feeling so powerful when he'd walked out of his office, walked away from Biagotti. And then had come the crash and the snow and how he'd wanted to die.

So much time to think in the trunk, it gave him a view of his life colored by Irish's words. 'You are strong, Sunny Diamond. Daisuki Sony. You are brilliantly strong like the bright tropical bird hiding in the foliage, just waiting for it's moment to fly.' He was waiting for his moment to fly. And where he wanted to fly was to Seattle, with Irish. He wanted to be powerful and strong, to be the beautiful tropical bird that Irish said he was.

While it felt like a lifetime in the trunk, his more reliable internal clock told him it had only been about twenty minutes. Irish could be dead.

"He's not," a soft, lisping voice whispered.

Sunny froze. He knew that voice. Chills ran up his arms, leaving little tingling bumps.

"Long time no listen," the voice purred, and Sunny could have sworn he felt the brush of fur, so very soft against his cheek. It took him back to childhood, to the stories he'd heard sitting on his mother's lap, of kitsune and Japan, of the Emperor and the spirits of their ancestors. Those has been just stories until his mother had disappeared, only to be replaced by a soft white fox spirit that called itself the 'kitsune of the sun'. "Konnichi wa, Kit."

It had been so long and it wasn't possible. Kitsune aren't real. Sister Margaret said so, and made him stand in the corner for an hour after school every day for a month. Kitsune aren't real. He had imagined it. And even if Taiyou no Kitsune had been real, as his little boy mind had thought, being in the trunk of a police car made no sense.

"I'm losing my mind."

"Sorry," Taiyou teased, "Stole that years ago."

The kitsune were thieves. His mother told him all about them, and how they'd followed his family for years. His family had served the royal family and were considered jewels themselves, some of them. Kitsune

were always trying to seduce them away from the royals they served. It was a lovely story, like all the stories his mother had told him. For the first time since he'd been thrown in the trunk he feared he might really die, or go insane, fail his ancestors badly. Only the insane thought that a fox spirit would come to help them. "Little Kit," Taiyou purred, holding him, "You're in trouble. What are you going to do?"

Sunny tensed. "I'm afraid Irish is going to die!"

"He was breathing when you saw him last. The blood was not spurting, only seeping. He's not going to die," Taiyou said. "You saw that with your own eyes. Just think a little more, Kit."

It was a waste of time to remind himself that Taiyou couldn't be real. "No one is going to help me."

"Who's help do you need? You are Sony Daisuki. The Emperor's blood flows in your family and the blood of the Goddess through the Emperor's. You are kitsune at heart. Outwit them. It is a long standing truth that violent people are greedy and greedy people are easy to steal from. What do you want to steal from them?"

"Nothing. I don't want to steal anything! I just want to be free."

"Why aren't you free?"

"Because they wouldn't let me be!"

"So what do you want to steal from them?" Taiyou asked, her soft fox like muzzle against his ear.

"Me! I want to steal myself," Sunny's heart raced. There might be a plan, a real plan. "I need a car, so I can go back to Irish. I need them not to look for us ever again!"

"Shhhh, Daisuki," she kipped softly, "Good plans are secret. Do you know the story of the dog who had a bone, but saw his reflection in the water, opened his mouth to bark and lost the bone he had for the bone that wasn't?"

Sunny nodded. "I know that story. I'm a bone."

Kitsune laughs sounded a little like a real fox he'd heard once. "You're a bone. Offer them a bigger bone. Think like the kitsune that you are."

"I'm not a kitsune," Sunny whispered, but the car was stopping, angling downwards into a garage. They were arriving wherever it was that they were going. His internal clock told him it had been thirty minutes. He had to hurry. "Don't leave me, Taiyou."

"Never. I'll always be with you," the fox spirit promised. Then the trunk opened and Sunny blinked against the light as he was hauled out. He just needed to know what dog thought he was a bone and he'd be able to figure out what bone to wave to get himself released. He could think his way out of this. He could.

## Chapter Twelve

Sunny's legs almost refused to hold his weight, after being cramped in the car, the shock the washed him out. The human mind is a magic puzzle box with shades and mirrors, tricks that spin and save a person from their own limitations, that hide the inevitable from them. Bose held Sunny on his feet by the back of his shirt, as Maynard closed the trunk.

"See? You heard him. He speaks Chinese," Maynard boasted. "I bet you're good with puzzle boxes aren't you, little bean counter?"

Chinese? Puzzle boxes? And it was too much. Sunny raced around in his thoughts. He didn't speak Chinese! Taiyou was the kitsune! Taiyou could solve this. Sunny heard his own voice, purring, confident.

"Anatatachi wa baka desu! Of course, I can solve a simple puzzle box. Now get your hands off me."

When he'd been little, after his mother had disappeared and his grandmother's hatred for her half breed grandson had lost all limitations, Taiyou had been his constant companion, had always been with him. Taiyou was a fox spirit and could steal the body of someone with royal blood, or at least that's what he'd thought as a child. Taiyou's Japanese was flawless, while Sunny's was battered and marred by being punished every time he spoke in it. This was all so far away and long ago though, so forgotten. It was Taiyou who did what kitsune always do though, and stole the keys to the police car.

Bose shoved Sunny away from him, the keys hiding in Sunny's palm in just the nick of time. "Arrogant bastard, aren't you?"

Sunny/Taiyou turned, smiled and Sunny could just about feel the kitsune muzzle making it look like a snarl. "To say that I can solve what you can't is like saying the sun is yellow," Sunny/Taiyou drawled.

Maynard swung his fist, striking out like a man who knows the target will be too scared to move. Sunny/Taiyou side stepped and brought a knee up into Maynard's unprotected groin. Kitsune are small and fast. Even as Maynard's arms closed on Sunny/Taiyou, the smaller man bowed and moved back out of reach.

Maynard growled, not really brought down by the blow, but not comfortable with it either, he drew his billy club, snarling. "You stupid little bastard! I'll teach you about arrogance!"

"Oh no," Taiyou/Sunny said, lifting his chin. "You have to know about something before you can teach about it, dog."

Sunny would never have acted this way. Taiyou had always gotten him in trouble, but there are times when the bird has to fly.

Laughter drew Sunny/Taiyou's attention towards the warehouse they were in. Near the door to the office stood an elegant gangster, clapping very lightly. Sunny/Taiyou bowed slightly, holding tightly to the stolen keys in one hand. His other hand he relaxed as much as he could, while holding the thumb in close. Sunny didn't think they could do it, just pull their hand free. That only made Taiyou more interested in doing just that. A moment later their left hand slipped free, and he brought his right around, swirling the still locked handcuff in loops around his wrist. The keys slipped into pants pocket on the other side, away from the twirling cuffs. "Are you the gentleman who requested my company?"

Randall laughed delightedly. "If I had known the company would have been so entertaining, I would have invited you soon, Mr. Diamond. You two buffoons go check on the ship. Give the guys down there a break. Don't go to far though. I will want to talk to you."

Maynard looked like he was going to chew through his own teeth. "Sure thing, Mr. Randall."

Sunny/Taiyou walked right by the men who'd kidnapped him, shot Irish, cool as a fox in a hen house. He still didn't know what bone to offer, but he sure had the big dog looking at the reflection.

"Tell him!" Bose hissed, shoving Maynard's arm.

Randall paused, door held open for Sunny/Taiyou. "Tell me what?"

The hair stood up on the back of Sunny's neck. Taiyou only cared about Irish because Sunny did, but Sunny cared with all his being. He did not want to hear the words that Irish was dead.

"We killed the guy he was with," Maynard said, standing up straighter, billy club in both hands. "He was Biagotti's boy too. Word on the street was that Biagotti was gonna pimp this fancy China man out to someone at a club tonight, but him and the Irish bootlegger was running away. So we killed'em and left him for dead. Biagotti's gonna get blamed."

Sunny/Taiyou's mind whirled. Biagotti would not get blamed. Everyone knew Biagotti did not leave bodies around, ever. Biagotti disappeared people, then pimped the families. Having these idiots sent back out to finish the job wasn't what Sunny/Taiyou needed to have happen either. Sunny/Taiyou spun, disgust clearly on his face. "Biagotti doesn't leave bodies. Just like he's not going to leave your bodies when he finds out you've sold him out."

"Explain," Randall snapped, searching Sunny's face.

"These two have been on Biagotti's payroll for years. I know. I cut payments for them. The last time I paid these two was two weeks ago."

Rage, dangerous and icy rage smoothed over Randall's face.

"Americans have no intelligence."

Bose ran for the driver's side door. Maynard, his resolve broken by Bose's cracking ran for the car too. Unfortunately for them, the keys were in Sunny/Taiyou's pocket. When the car didn't start, Randall and Sunny stood there for a moment, watching. It was long enough for about four men to line up at the warehouse entrance, tommy guns ready. Timing was everything.

"Um?" Randall asked, tilting his head as he watched Sunny's reaction.

"Cars don't start without keys," Sunny/Taiyou said, handing them back, "At least not for most people."

"Well, aren't you a piece of work," Randal said, bouncing the stolen keys in his palm. "I think you and I can come to an agreement."

He turned to go into the office, motioning for Sunny to join him. As soon as Sunny/Taiyou had turned their back, gun fire started, shattering glass, thudding against metal. Randall may not leave bodies either, but he definitely didn't mind making them. Sunny hid further inside his own head, doing the thinking, planning for the flamboyant Taiyou. "I wasn't really looking for a new employer," he said, thinking that Taiyou made his voice sound suave, elegant even.

"I wasn't looking for a new employee. Sometimes fate just gives nice surprises," Randall said, motioning to a seat on the other side of his desk as he closed the door.

There was a girl in the room, slender, young, but still a woman. A scarf was tied as a gag in her mouth. Wrists tied to the chair she sat in, fury sparkled off her like fresh snow glittered. Sunny wanted to smile at her, to

promise he'd help her. Taiyou wasn't ready to give up any of their cards. "What's the deal with the dame?"

"She," Randall said, sitting down in his chair, and shoving the puzzle box toward Sunny, "had the misfortune to be getting on a ship that I needed possession of. Open this box for me."

The girl snarled through her gag, black slippered feet kicking the air in frustration.

Sunny/Taiyou picked up the box. It was beautiful, hand carved with perfect Chinese writing over it. When he tipped it to look at the other sides the contents rolled and rattled, very like loose gem stones. He couldn't read all the Chinese, though some of the characters had meanings in Japanese that Taiyou recognized. He recognized 'marriage', 'gift', and 'balance' or 'harmony'.

Taiyou sat down in the chair, giving into Sunny's need to look like he was doing as he was told, and they started seeking the answer to the puzzle box. Going to work for Randall wouldn't be much different than dying, just a different kind of dying. He'd walked away from Biagotti and nothing short of freedom was going to work for him.

"Can you open it? I don't want the box damaged. Beautiful things deserve to be protected."

"I can open it," Sunny/Taiyou said with more confidence than they felt. The Chinese characters needed to be pressed in the right order, making a word of some kind, and Sunny didn't read Chinese quite that well.

Maybe Irish would wake up, and get back in his car, and just go to Seattle. Go some place safe. Sunny almost wished it, as he'd wished the snow would hide him away from everything forever, bury him away from life. Taiyou didn't wish it. "Do I get a prize for opening it?"

"I offered those two idiots their lives for bringing me someone who could open the box. I'll let you leave, if you can open it within the next five minutes."

"And the girl?"

"Biagotti buys girls, too? Or only boys?"

"If I can open the box, I want my freedom and the girl's." Sunny/Taiyou kept working at the box, fingers moving rapidly through all possible combinations. Taiyou wouldn't have been able to keep the organized pattern, but numbers and patterns were Sunny's blindingly bright talent.

Randall laughed. "Very well. If she'll go with you," he amended. "You can have her. If you open the box."

A polite knock drew Randall's attention to the door. "Come."

"Boss," a light haired woman said, sticking her head into the office. "Juliet and I picked up a guy. We were following the coppers, like you said, and we cleaned up after them."

Sunny's fingers fumbled, almost making him drop the box until Taiyou reasserted control of the body and they sat there coolly, looking from the woman to Randall.

"Is he alive?"

"For as long as you want him to be," she said, smiling.

"Good," Randall said. To Sunny he said, "I seem to have acquired another of Biagotti's former employees. Do you want to reconsider my offer of employment?"

Hiding again, under the snow of employment with Randall.

Sunny/Taiyou decided that was just a longer way to die. Anything to stay alive. That had been the rule of law for a long time. Two days of knowing Irish and he understood being alive differently. Suddenly he felt a faith in himself that made him believe, deep in his being that he would escape, that he had to try. There was no other way back. He'd free himself, Irish, and this girl. "I am honored by your offer, Mr. Randall, but I wouldn't be able to accept."

The girl groaned, kicked the air at him again.

"Mr. Randall," another female voice said, stepping into the office.

"There's a mess out there, broken bottles and glass. Can I put him in here until you decide what to do with him?"

"Of course, Juliet. Lay him on the couch." Randall motioned towards polished leather couch. Not very comfortable, but pretty and highly stain resistant.

Irish was walking, dazed, eyes glassy, one arm hanging limply, the other over the shoulders of the woman who took him to the couch. Sunny's heart soared! Irish was alive. It was Taiyou's sarcastic internal comment that the only way they were getting out of there is if everyone else thought they were dead. Sunny's fingers had gone back to working combinations on the box as well.

"Now, Mr. Diamond, I believe you have a little over half a minute to open that box and get your prize."

And then the lid released, sliding open easily as if it had never been blocked in the first place.

The girl growled around her gag. Sunny/Taiyou ignored her, as he handed the box to Randall. Even in the single light in the room, what was inside was beautiful. Hundred of emeralds, in all shapes. "The box," Sunny said, feeling very pleased with himself.

Randall took the box, leaning back in his chair, fingers caressing the beautiful stones. "What is it? Her dowry? There must be a small fortune in stones here."

Irish groaned as he tried to sit up and Sunny's head turned too fast, to check on him. "Yes, her dowry."

"You're free to go. Take the girl," Randal said.

"Irish? I want Irish too."

"Too bad we negotiated before he got here," Randall said. "He stays. Maybe he'll be interested in employment."

Sunny turned back to Randall, looked him right in the eyes. "What do you need a wounded smuggler for?"

Being questioned didn't seem to set well with Randall. "Maybe I just want to finish what those idiots had started. Give me a reason to let him live?"

"I wouldn't let you hurt him," Sunny said, last stand determination hardening in him.

"What you going to do? Let me use your face for a punching bag the way Biagotti does? You should work for me. You'll find me an excellent employer, as long as you don't disappoint me."

"I don't work for anyone. I will fight you if you try to stop me from taking him and the girl out of here," Sunny stood, the large handcuff clinking against the desk. "You don't own us and you have no rights over us. Don't dishonor us by trying to take what you have no right to claim."

"Do you have any idea to whom you're speaking? I can't believe a Chinese fagot is insulting me in my own office. I'm going to peel your skin off and make you eat it."

Irish tried again to sit up, but Juliet shoved him back down, punched the wound in his shoulder. He cried out and Sunny's gut clenched. This wasn't

how this was supposed to go! Feeling backed into a corner, where not even Taiyou could help him, Sunny took two steps to the girl and started to untie one of her arms. "We're walking out of here now."

He had enough time to get one arm untied before Randall was around that desk with a fist like a German canon. It caught Sunny in his already bruised face and the small accountant crumpled, skidding several feet towards the couch. The woman kicked at Randall as she worked on getting her other arm free. He back handed her enough to send blood splattering against the window of his office, then stalked towards Sunny.

"Get up you little piss ant. You can't fight a pansy favorer like Biagotti, you don't stand a chance against me! Get up on your feet if you can, or start begging like the whipped dog you are."

Somehow he was alone in his mind, no Taiyou, just himself. On his hands and knees, blood from a cut by his eye trickling down his cheek like a tear. It wasn't the smartest or safest choice he'd ever made, and he knew he might regret it, already regretted it, but there was no other way. He simply could not beg anymore. Slowly he got back to his feet, wishing very much he was Taiyou again and how easy that would be to fight this man if he were a kitsune and not just a small human man. "I'm not a dog. I'm a kitsune and we don't bow to mutts like you!"

He dodged the next blow, then swung the handcuff like a weapon, catching Randall in the shoulder. The man was on him in a moment though, both hands around a slender neck, choking. Panic set in and Sunny clawed at the hands around his throat, eyes wide. Taiyou's voice whispered in his thoughts, 'As long as you fight, you are free.'

Sunny stamped hard on one of Randall's feet, with all the rage he'd built up for years, as if this were the last blow he was ever going to strike for himself and his own value. Suddenly the fingers loosened, relaxed. Sunny got hold of the hand cuff, the huge iron bit of it and holding it in both hands brought it up and smacked the gangster under the jaw. Blood splattered and Randall went down like a half filled sack of flour.

The freed girl stood behind the fallen gangster, the chair she'd been bound to in her hands, a very satisfied look on her face.

Sunny spun around towards Irish. He was sitting up now, the woman who'd hit him keeping her distance now. The smile on Irish's face lightened the air, made it possible for Sunny to breathe again.

"Time to leave," Sunny said, feeling victorious. He held out his hand to Irish, offered his shoulder and helped him up. "I'm done with these people."

"Take me Colorado," the woman said, holding her box. "Please."

A hint of the lady's man sparked in Irish as he smiled at her, tipped his head. "I think Colorado is on the way to where we're going. Right, Sunny?"

Irish held out his hand. "I'm Irish," he said, then touched his cheek to Sunny's forehead, "This is my partner and lover, Sunny. You can come with us if you don't mind riding around with two free gay men."

She blinked, tilted her head. English was not her first, nor second language. "Am Mi Ying! You lovers, good, good, all fine. We go Colorado."

The three of them walked out, just as if there hadn't been any doubt, ever. Juliet and her sister walked out right after that and went for parts unknown. Randall wasn't likely to be very happy when he woke up, but people on their ways else where weren't real concerned with what Randall thought.

It turned out that Mi Ying could drive and read English better than she spoke it. Which was good because Sunny didn't know how to drive and Irish fell asleep in the back, head in Sunny's lap, as soon as his shoulder was cleaned and bandaged.

They didn't make it to Columbus by morning, but making into the dawn free and safe was enough. Free, safe, and in love was more than Sunny Diamond had ever really dreamed about having. His hand on Irish's back, feeling the gentle, continual rhythm of his breathing, that was all he wanted.

Interlude!

Hi!

\*bows\*

I'm Nix! This is the page where I tell you about myself. Well, kind of, at least for a moment.

Authors get a page like this in manga, and I wanted one too.

So, I live in Seattle. I'm not Japanese, but I'm trying to learn to speak Japanese, so maybe that counts for something.

Did you like Emerald Tears? I want to write more with them. I think the next story is called 'Explaining the Fox’.

The next story in this little book is Arrested Kisses. Daniel and Taylish start in a book called Shadow of Wishes and I have so many stories to write with them too. Taylish's dad, 'Peace', is in Kai Stubborn, which hopefully will be out in an anthology this year.

Thank you very much for reading my work!

I have so many ideas for stories and I want to make manga, to draw beautiful worlds and stories. I really glad you're here to let me share them with you, whatever I manage to come up with!

I hope 2006 is a great year for you! And now back to our stories!

Nix

## Arrested Kisses

by Nix Winter

*I woke up in the hospital once and he was holding my hand, sleeping with his head on the bed. I realized then that I hadn't lost colors, they'd just changed. There was the sound of his breathing and that made the same feeling as the yellow sunshine or the happy green grass that time I ran barefoot across College Park. He was alive.*

*White is the day we got married, when I couldn't feel the ground under my feet, as if I had wings. I'd never felt that color in all my life before that, so white I felt like my soul would become a sun all it's own.*

*Red was the first time I got angry at him and screamed. That was red and black and jagged, and he just made this little mumbling sound and said he was sorry. And red became the color of a fire, warm in a fireplace, comforting, and I understood that I could really tell him just what I thought, and I didn't have to yell. I've never yelled at Taylish since.*

*Black is the color of learning how to navigate this level of my life. You see, I'm a gamer, 'hardcore', and sometimes in a game the rules change. One level's not like the last. On this level, I just can't see. That's all. So I see the color of his hair with my fingers, silk, golden, warm, scented like him, sweet and a little like the tea he drinks all the time. The the darkness of this level, his face feels Japanese, almond eyes, soft lashes, soft lips. I remember though, how pale he was, how his hair made him look paler, rebellious gold that he didn't get from any god of his ancestors.*

*I'm supposed to write this essay about how being blind has made my life different.*

*So many things changed that night, the night I lost my sight. Being blind is supposed to be this bad thing, but I can go where I want now. I can do what I want. I am touched only when I want to be. I eat what I want. I laugh every day. I can go back to school and I can leave for school any time I want. I like these colors better than the ones I had before.*

There wasn't enough for an essay, really. Daniel had his computer play it back to him, corrected a couple of type-o's and wondered what he

should add. His credits from Hong Kong would not transfer and they'd made him take his ged before they'd let him into college. Amy had helped him study. The things he hadn't known were much bigger than the things he had known. He'd passed and felt really stupid for being so proud of what anyone in his new country could have done easily. Amy never made him feel like a stupid whore, never said he wasn't just made him feel like the world was where it was supposed to be. Taylish had been supportive too, even if he'd missed a lot of the GED quest due to a case that had him on loan to Narcotics. As far as Daniel was concerned, Taylish's police department had as much politics as Royal's gang ever had, but Taylish promised him that they didn't just kill people they didn't agree with.

He wanted to add to his essay, 'I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but losing my sight is the smallest change in my life. Just teach me to count money and how the buses run.' Of course, he knew that the people at his college thought they were being so nice, and they were. They just had it all wrong. His new life was better than anything he could have imagined.

If he could get Taylish to stop worrying over the whole blind thing, it would be even better. So he couldn't see? He could find his way around fine.

He didn't want Pastor 'Peace' Morgan staying over just because Taylish was afraid to leave him alone. It irritated, caged him, even though he knew it came from love. And so sleep danced merrily away from him and worries for how Taylish was shadowed his thoughts, though he refused to give them grounds.

Taylish had been taking care of himself for a long time. Daniel refused to think about what Taylish had been doing when they first meet, with a bullet hole still in him. Really, being blind wasn't that bit of a danger. Not as bad as a solid hero complex anyway.

The knock on the door was soft, and Daniel paused in his typing. His first thought was fear. For so much of his life a knock on his door meant work, the kind of work that a gangster pretty boy was expected to do. His heart raced and his teeth clenched, until he blew air into his cheeks. He had married a habitual hero and he wasn't going to let himself be a coward, not for anything. Fingers patted across the desk until he reached his phone, and then his other hand found his stick. Another reason he didn't want a guest in the house was he didn't trust anyone except Taylish

not to leave crap in the middle of the room. It wasn't like Peace wasn't thoughtful, kind, helpful, but Daniel still hadn't forgotten that box of bibles. Well, there was also that it was a new apartment.

All of their boxes had been packed into the second bedroom, so there was nothing out in the open yet. He wore the clothes he'd come home from college in, jeans and Gackt tee-shirt he'd nicked from Taylish. So quiet as a mouse, he slipped passed where Peace slept on the couch, to the door.

He hated that his hand shook as he reached for the door knob. The simple freedom to open the door when he wanted too, it was both terrifying and delicious. In that moment of stillness he was sure he could hear a woman crying on the other side of the door and his thoughts went to his lost mother, the woman he'd never known. Had she been on the other side of a door crying sometime?

Slowly, he opened the door a little and the sound of a woman crying rushed over him. The edge of his sunglasses touched the door frame and he whispered. "What's wrong?"

"Does a cop live here?" She asked, smooth southern accent, rich voice. It made him think of a genteel black woman, with full lips and a neat wool skirt, a little hat with a feather.

"Why?" He asked, telling himself he wasn't afraid to have opened the door. No one was going to punish him. "Are you okay," he asked, genuinely concerned.

"It's my Annie. She's gone off to that bar with her boyfriend again and he's going to get her into trouble something awful. I just know he's going to hurt her," she said, and before Daniel knew it, she had his hand and then her arms around him, whispering, as if it were the darkest of secrets, "You're the cop, yes? You'll help me? Annie, she's got trouble with the law already and I don't want her to get taken away from me. I love her, but I ain't been as strong as I could. I'll be better please, if you help me get her back. I'll be strong."

"Shhh," Daniel whispered back, stroking braided hair that reminded him of what Maya's hair looked like. "I'll help you. I'll find her. You're a good mother. It's really good to love your child."

She wrapped her arms around him, pushing the door open a little more, holding him and for a moment he could pretend she was his mother, his

mother loving him. "Thank you! I have a photo. You saw her when you moved in. She was the one singing so loud."

"She has a beautiful voice. Tell me what she looks like? What was she wearing?"

"She's as tall as I am, soft hair dyed purple. She's half white and she's pretty, big eyes, loud voice. He says he's going to get her a chance to sing all he's gonna get her is knocked up. And she's only 17, Lord help us, she's going to get arrested."

"It's okay, I'll find Annie and bring her home," Daniel said.

"Your husband wouldn't mind you going out so late? I'm sorry if I cause you any bother."

"No, no," Daniel said, realize she thought he was Taylish. That's what you get when you go only on your eyes. "It'll be alright. What's your phone number? I'll call you when I find her."

She gave him her number and he memorized it. That was something else he'd learned from his early life as a gang property. Important information must be saved, without paper.

"You be safe now, okay? That boyfriend of hers is a mean one."

"I can take care of myself, trust me," Daniel said, shoving her gently back out into the darkness that their burned out hall light gave them. "Just go home and let me take care of it."

"You're the nicest come cop I ever met! I'm so glad you and that nice blind husband of yours moved in!"

Daniel let his stick fall behind the door and reached out to the woman again, one hand holding to the door frame so he didn't lose where he was. She reached back to him and he pulled her close, holding her close and wiping away tears with the hand that had held the door. "Every mother should love their children the way you do."

She laid her head against his chest and he rubbed her back. Somehow she didn't notice his glasses and he wanted so much to know if his mother had loved him like this, at least a little. "Give me your number so I can tell you if Annie comes home," she asked.

Daniel gave her his number, a slight guilt and doubt nagging at him. He should just call Taylish, but Taylish was finishing up a big case and would be coming home. If Daniel asked him, he'd send someone, and a real cop might really have to arrest the woman's daughter.

Peace rolled over on the couch and took a deep sleep filled breath. The need to not be caged, to be a hero of his own, to prove that he could do what he needed too filled Daniel. He'd won his freedom and this mother had held him and asked him for help. Granted, she thought he was Taylish, but he could do anything Taylish could do!

His shoes were right where he'd left them, on the little smooth shelf right by the door. He leaned down and picked one up. Leaning against the wall, he quietly slipped on one of the little black Chinese cotton strap ons. He'd just slip out and right back. He had his wallet in his pocket and his cell phone, which he shoved into one pocket. He'd just go to the bar, find the girl with the loud and pretty voice, and bring her home.

He was getting his other shoe on and reaching for his stick when it fell, hitting the hardwood floor with a slap. Daniel grinned into the dark, a sheepish apologetic smile that no one could even see. Then the lamp clicked on and Peace took a slow breath, the kind of breath that Daniel had labeled 'dragon breath'.

"Happy waking, Father," Daniel said, tightening the buckle on his shoe. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"Obviously," Peace said, his back cracking as he stretched, and then yawned. "Where are you going, Daniel?"

'Nowhere' seemed like a hopelessly ridiculous answer and Daniel had never really learned to lie well, except for clients, and Royal, okay, everyone he'd ever known, except now, now he knew new people. "Going to the bar to get a neighbor girl back for her mother. Wouldn't be but a minute."

There's a sound that Daniel had only been able to make by sucking his cheeks in tight and opening his mouth. The sound happened a few times and he imagined Peace sucking his cheeks in, opening his mouth to say words that had just gotten swallowed. He did appreciate Peace. "Father, please do not concern yourself. It is simply a bar and only one block away."

"In the pitch of night, Good Lord! It's nearly midnight. Daniel Morgan," Peace said, hitting the coffee table as he stood, sounding very like he must have said Taylish's name. "I do not believe you are about to go out in the middle of the night. Are you drinking?"

Daniel's eyebrows arched, and he imagined big anime eyes going wide on the front of his sunglasses. Peace Morgan was the most tolerant and kind of men, working hard for world peace and Daniel knew he loved his son, loved even his son's husband, and yet, that tone of voice made Daniel want to hide. "Now you see here! If I wanted a drink, I'd go in the bed room and get one! I told you where I was going."

Just because he wasn't going to yell at Taylish didn't mean Peace wasn't going to get an ear full if he took that tone with him.

"Daniel, it's just not safe," the lecture started, and the low pulsing of something that was going to be slow warming up and stay going for a while. "You have to accept the limitations that God has given you. I understand that you want to remain active and I admire that! I do! You're so dynamic and full of life, but even a sighted person should not be out at midnight going to a bar. All manner of people are found in places like that!"

Daniel was very glad of his glasses then, and that they really didn't display the big anime expressions he imagined. He forced his face calm and bowed very slightly. "Esteemed Father, please accept my apologies. We will call the authorities to help the girl. Can you please make me some tea to calm my nerves? I might not be able to find the tea pot."

"Now that's being rational! Daniel, you know I love you, right? I love you and you're my child as much as Taylish is. I should show you the reports of what happens in other countries. The statistics are just horrible! Of course, I'll make tea for both of us. Were you up this late doing your homework?"

"Yes, Esteemed Father," Daniel said, squatting down, reaching for his stick, listening for the sound of Peace's footsteps towards the kitchen.

"Really, you can call me Peace," Peace said, sounding very like his voice was in the kitchen. "Everyone does. Did I tell you that Tay's mother gave me that name?"

Well, yes, actually, he had, but Daniel didn't mind hearing again. He liked hearing about Taylish's mother. At the moment though, he had to do something. Silently his fingers moved up the door to where Taylish had put the hook for his keys. "I love that story," Daniel said truthfully, but then he was out the door, as very quietly as he could.

It was fifty steps to the sidewalk and Daniel could tell he'd cleared the apartment shelter when the wind danced over him. They say it didn't get really cold in Los Angeles, but it did get a bit cold to someone who hardly ever went out side before. And hot too.

The tip of his stick found the one step down to the main side walk and he slowed, searching the area beyond the stop with the rubber marshmallow of his stick. Then he stepped down and held his lip between his teeth as he started on the 73 steps to the corner of the block. He reached for the pole that had the walk button on it. There could have been a foot or ten between himself and the pole and for a moment he panicked, afraid he'd gotten too far one direction or the other, but then his hand found it, searched down it's rough metal skin to the large button.

The walk sound was just going off when he heard Peace calling his name. Daniel tapped down the road and stepped into the cross walk. He hadn't even heard any cars idling. He also hadn't counted the steps across the road. When he and Taylish had walked around the block, walked to college, and back, his blond husband had made a particularly funny joke as they were crossing the street. Taylish was too funny for his own good sometime.

And it made the crosswalk seem like it could span the distance between heaven and earth, step, step, tap, tap, step, and it just seemed like it would go on forever. He was going in a straight line. He knew he was. And this wasn't one of those funny cross walks went diagonal at the last minute or something.

"Daniel! Wait," Peace called as the walk signal stopped chirping

The tip of his stick hit the sidewalk and Daniel took a deep breath. Careful, he checked the sidewalk then stepped up. He turned and smiled, crooked. "Light's turned. I'll meet you at the bar, Peace!"

"I'm going to call Taylish!"

"And tell him what?" Daniel smacked the tip of his stick against the sidewalk. "Tell him that I went for a walk? I am not a prisoner!"

"I didn't mean it that way! Daniel, Lord forgive me! I'm sorry," he said, his voice sounding like it was coming closer.

"Are you crossing against the light? That's a misdemeanor, Peace!"

"Be quiet," Peace said, now on the same side of the street as Daniel. "Very well. Let's go get this girl and go home."

“I thought you were going to call Taylish and make sure I stayed in the apartment like a good little cripple,” Daniel said, holding his stick too tight, suddenly very angry.

“I’m sorry,” Peace said. And there it was, that same thing that Taylish did, that genuine request for forgiveness.

Daniel took a deep breath, slowly let it out. “Well fuck me. How can I stay angry at you then?” He took Peace’s arm, grinned. “We’ll make better time that way.”

“You’re not a cripple. Your spirit would never let you be.”

“And you’re not really an asshole, same reason,” Daniel said, grinning again.

“Don’t use such profanity. It isn’t becoming.”

“Oh come on. It doesn’t hurt anyone and it makes me feel better. Haven’t you ever just wanted to? To like spit out your anger in some ball of words that would be acid if they were real?”

“No, because the chances are too good that acid words will hurt someone,” Peace said.

Daniel sighed. “What if you hurt people and don’t mean to.”

“If we confess the lord is faithful and just to forgive us our sins,” Peace said, patting Daniel’s hand where it rested on his arm.

Daniel had wanted to believe what Peace believed. Before the wedding, when he’d been living at Peace’s place, he’d really wanted to believe. He was doing good to really believe that Taylish loved him, to believe in his own trust in Taylish. He’d work on a God he couldn’t see in time.

“And fuck,” Peace said, and Daniel could hear the blush in his voice, “It’s not the damn word anyway. It’s the way someone might feel about the word. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Peace, we need to turn here. The bar is half way on this block.”

The music was loud, even from half a block away. It was disturbingly similar to a Hong Kong club from the distance. “Is there a line?”

“A line? Where?”

“To get into the club,” Daniel said.

“No, no line.”

“Are you dressed like a priest or anything?”

“Certainly not!”

“Good,” Daniel said, slipping his glasses off and sliding them into the pocket on his sleeve.

The door man was the kind that you could smell before you got there and the place went down several notches in Daniel's mind. This was no great British college pub. The smell was more like cheap cologne and leather, sweat and spilled alcohol.

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The unmarked squad car purred to life. Maya hadn't been supposed to tune it up, but she had to do something to look like she belonged at the run down garage across from the club where Taylish was working undercover. Their targets, a small time gang trying to bring illegals in from Mexico for sex trade, were now on their way down town in black and whites. What Taylish really wanted was a beer and Daniel in his lap, far from his father, and to watch the football game he'd recorded last Sunday. All he had to do was throw his dad out, and well, it was just a little past midnight, he'd make it up to him next Sunday, or something.

“My mother wants me to meet someone,” Maya said, throwing the car into fifth as she merged into traffic.

Taylish tried not to grind his teeth. “As long as it's not me,” he said, rolling down his window and sticking his arm out. “Meeting someone might not hurt you.”

“Yeah, well, that's not all she means. I should just tell her I'm a Lesbian and that I'm planning on getting artificially inseminated. What I really need is to meet a nice man like Daniel.”

Taylish took a deep, slow breath, and leaned his head back. Air flowing over his hand, between his fingers and before he knew it he was smiling. Daniel. If he closed his eyes, he could feel Daniel sitting his lap, fingers reading his face. The soft pads of his fingers against his lips as Taylish told him all the highlights of the day. Daniel had his own life, his own concerns and goals, but he still made Taylish know that he cared about Taylish's life and experience.

A shiver danced up ~~the~~ Taylish's back. Daniel's laugh and the way he listened to everything, caught more things than Taylish did sometimes, it made Taylish homesick, even though he'd been home the night before.

When he worked, he was someone else, often several someone else's. He became what he needed to become in order to get what he needed. When he was with Daniel, there was nothing he could hide. "I can't wait to get home."

"You haven't heard a word I said, have you?"

"Maya-san," Taylish said, formal and only a little teasing, "We caught the bad guys. It's very early in the morning and all I want to do is go home to my husband and get laid, watch a little football, and believe that the bad guys will wait for me to have my three days off. I'm sorry your mom's biological clock is louder. You think she would have been done when she got you."

"Oh my god, what kind of thing is that to say? How can you be the most agile of undercover officers and still be such an insensitive prick?"

"I am not on duty right now," he said, wishing he had a cigarette. "I'm tired. Alright? You did a great job the last couple days. Really. You're good at what you do. Why do we get off duty and you turn into one big ball of 'oh my god my family is driving me nuts!' Get some balls, will you?"

"Oh you're one to talk, making excuses for why your dad should stay at your place while we were on this case," she snapped.

"It's a new apartment! He's always trying to do things for himself, and that's great, but what if he goes out in the middle of the night to get milk for shit's sake. I don't know. He might! Don't look at me that way. Okay, so you want to know something endearing and emotional and all that psychobabble crap? I love him and I need him and I'd just sit down and not get up again if something happened to him. He's like a part of me. So. Okay. I paid to have my dad's house fumigated. I didn't lie."

"And you're saying I did lie?"

"You're the one that said you ought to tell your mom you were a lesbian. You could always just get knocked up. That'd get her a grandchild."

"I thought Daniel was the one raised by wolves. What kind of a fool thing is that to say anyway?"

"If I could. I would. I'd get knocked up and make Daniel bring me tea and rub my feet. Damn, Maya, don't you want to feel life growing in you? That must be the greatest thing."

“Only a gay man would say that. Oh yeah, swollen feet and big old breasts, hips that will never see jeans again, bleeding for weeks after. Sure, yeah, greatest feeling ever. My mother told me all about it.”

Taylish laughed then, head tilted back, long legs stretched out against the floorboards. “I wonder if Daniel would be the mother, take care of a baby, and I could come home every night. I'd go back to being a beat cop and come home every night and pick my kid up and tell them how much I loved them. I wouldn't be like some parents. I wouldn't be off chasing around the world trying to make it better. No. I'd be home.”

“At least between cases. Hey, our phone's ringing. Can you get it out of my pocket?”

“Oh hell no, I am not sticking my hand in your pocket,” Taylish's left hand rose, two fingers together like they had a cigarette between them still. “I went through sensitivity class. I'm too smart for you!”

“Shut the fuck up and get the phone!” She snarled, both hands on the wheel. “It might be important.”

Their car lacked a police radio, which was good because cb's were very much out of fashion and drug dealers shot people with police radios in their car. “Fine, fine! Don't take a joke.”

“Hello,” he said, closing his eyes and hoping it wouldn't be anything like his captain wanting a report filled out tonight, instead of a few days from then. “Detective Morgan.”

The dispatcher about snorted something out her nose, and Taylish hoped it was soda, something with lots of fizz. “You answered!”

“You rang,” Taylish quipped, and then sat a little straighter as Maya glared at him. “What's going on?”

“There is a large scale altercation in the vicinity of your new address, Detective Morgan, and I know you'll be off duty soon. I was wondering if you might like to check it out. There are a couple other cars already on their way.”

Much more serious now, “Taylish shifted. “What's the address? What kind of altercation?”

“Bar room brawl. There are three ambulances on the way as well now, and a couple of fire trucks.”

“Christ. Do I ever get a break? Thanks, Emma! Thanks a lot.”

“No problem, Tay.”

“What is it,” Maya asked, taking the exit nearest to Taylish's place.

“You think your mom is a pain? Just wait till you hear what Peace has to say about a barroom brawl being three blocks from our new apartment. I can just hear the lecture now. He thinks Daniel is some kind of fragile soul. I swear he thinks Daniel is the son he never had.”

“Oh wow, jealous much?” Maya asked, brown eyes watching Taylish squirm while they waited a stop light through.

One booted foot propped against the dash and he laid both arms over his bent knee. “I'm not jealous of Daniel. Maybe, maybe a little. My dad is always gone, always out saving someone, but he has time for Daniel. Maybe he just thinks that Daniel needs rescuing or something.”

“I think it's just that you're such a prick. You always act like you got some big fight going on with your dad.” The light turned green and she hung a right. “Where too?”

“Well, for a starter, I'd think, the flashing lights up ahead might give you a clue, as you're so damn good with the obvious.”

“Fuck you, Taylish,” Maya spat back easily, more friendly than angry. “And damn, that is a lot of lights.”

The fire truck was just getting there and Taylish found it just a little odd, surreal to have a barroom brawl in this part of town. It wasn't like it wasn't a good place to be, three blocks from the university. He was going to have to watch Daniel around all those college boys. “Maya, I'm tired of taking care of people.”

“You shouldn't have married a blind guy then, uh?”

“No, it's not that. He takes care of himself. It's that, I guess you're right. I'm a prick,” he said, slamming the door and talking to her over the top of the car. “I just always have to be on top of what Peace and Daniel are thinking, what they're doing. I guess it's like being at work, always got to know what the perps are doing next.”

She pulled her badge out of her back pocket, and smirked. “Makes you a good cop.”

“Makes me a shitty relative. Come on. Let's get in there and see if we can help mop this up. I want to go home and make it up to Daniel. I will not be a prick today,” Taylish said with a laugh, his own badge now strapped to his wrist.

They got to the entrance though and found it closed, with a couple of uniforms waiting for a battering ram.

Behind the doors, which some brilliant person had locked from the inside, the place sounded like a mosh pit gone bad.

“You have someone on the back door,” Maya asked, looking the building over, looking for another way in. “Any idea what's going on it there?”

“Know the same thing you do,” Officer Kelly said, shrugging. “Brawl broke a little after two. Some frat boys and some hazing. Dumb asses. You'd think their parents would get more for their money. We're just waiting for the battering ram.”

Wanting a cigarette was like having your teeth itch on the inside and know that only that one thing can fix it. Taylish twitched at his hair, eyed the building, tongue between his cheek and teeth. “Neee, so how long you think that's going to take?”

“Probably about forty minutes,” Kelly said, shrugging. “It's just a bunch of stupid frat boys.”

Maya's nose gets all pinched when she's displeased, and it always makes Taylish wonder if she's going to have little fox fangs when she snarls. That cop she was about to lay into if he didn't shut his mouth though had been on the force longer than her, she'd just gotten wild lucky, that was all, and been good when she got that break.

“Never a cop when you need one,” Tay sad, smirking, standing with his hips to the side, low cut jeans leaving his belly button visible and his skin tight crop top showing off lean muscle definition. From his back pocket he pulled a pair of very thin gloves, microfiber and Kevlar. “What? You expect me to wait all day? I have a home to go to now.”

Maya's cheeks puffed out. “Oh yeah! How am I going to explain to Daniel that I got you into a barroom brawl on the way home.”

“You just drove me here, baby,” Taylish teased, enjoying the offended look on the face of the officer they'd been talking too. There were times when unorthodox just worked better. “Just gonna go up this pipe to that window. I'll open the door and Officer Kelly can arrest all the troublemakers. How's that?”

Officer Kelly's partner, a sharp ferret like Asian man, was standing with them now, along with a firefighter who had her arms across her chest. "We should just wait. The forward squad will be here soon."

Tay's grin could have been bottled and labeled 'get your ass in trouble', cocky and flippant. It made him ageless, the essence of male. No one ever said that heroes were always careful. It was a brick building and easy to climb, with the solid pipe there to hold too. The cloth of his shirt got tight against his arms as his muscles worked. He didn't really like heights, but the second story really didn't count as high, he told himself.

He reached the window quick and pulled himself in. "No smoke," he called back. And then it occurred to him that he might have just climbed his way into a burning building.

"The breaker just went, the power's off," One of the firefighters said.

"Wait, let me get the glasses," Maya said and ran back to the car. She opened the trunk and ran back.

Tay held his hand out. She hesitated. "Well, how did you expect to get it up here. Toss."

"You better catch it, ass!" She tossed though and six thousand dollars of equipment up towards Tay.

He did, easily and quickly disappeared into the building. If it was a burning building, at least the fire department was already here. He made a mental note to himself to ask why the fire department didn't just kick the damn doors in. The glasses she'd thrown up to him fit over his head like a jeweler's glass, putting a single infrared lens over one eye.

The mission was just to make into the bar below, open the door, and let the uniforms arrest all the idiots without causing too much property damage. That was really less out of concern for whatever sap owned this place and more for what his dad would say when he saw a busted in door. He could just see himself explaining that. Resentment rose in him for all the things he wasn't really responsible for that he tried to make up to his dad.

Once he got out into the hall way, the sprinklers were going off as well and it too a negative amount of time for him to be soaked. If there wasn't a fire, and his gut told him there wasn't, when he found out who pulled the fire alarm, he was going to kick their ass.

The hall opened on to a balcony that overlooked the pub like bar. His mouth opened to yell for them all to freeze when a figure on the bar caught his attention. Even in the dark, seeing only the outline in red and outline, he knew that body. Slim, graceful, one leg behind the other, braced like some martial arts master, his Daniel defended the top of the bar in some twisted king of the hill game. It was Daniel. Taylish knew this no matter how impossible it was. It was the way he moved, like the rest of the world just hadn't touched him and he'd fallen out of some video game somewhere. He stood there, a unseen witness to how very helpless Daniel wasn't.

Three other persons, men by the size of them surrounded him and made occasional grabs for him. Those grabs were smacked away easily with that stick that Daniel used, the solid one, five feet of flexible fiberglass that was better than any bamboo staff ever wanted to be. There was another person behind Daniel, smaller than him and clinging to him close enough to give Taylish a flash of jealousy.

He knew he should call out, stop the fight, but secretly watching Daniel swing that staff, the power in his shoulders as he hit, both hands on his staff, the end sweeping easily the hand reaching for his leg. Then he spun, laying the staff hard across the face of someone who'd actually grabbed the person behind him, sending that man back into a rack of glass ware. It was only seconds, but he wasn't a cop right then. He was a person watching his lover be a dangerous panther. Desire bypassed any reason he had and tingled along his manhood. Daniel was so beautiful.

Then his reason kicked back in. Assault and battery.

And just when the morning was sliding towards total shit, a voice rose over the din of the crowd. "Daniel! Where are you?"

His eyes tracked that voice home, and there, in the middle of a barroom brawl, at three in the morning, was his father, Pastor Peace Morgan. It was his father, lean, but stocky, stiff and holding both hands up as a pair of smaller figures wrestled each other past him. The water from the sprinklers was making everyone slip and fall.

"Tay? Where are you?" Maya said in his ear, "The battering ram is here."

"It's okay, I'll have it open in a minute. Maya, Daniel's in here."

"Oh god! Is he okay? How did he get in there?"

“Well, I'm guessing he walked. He's holding his own pretty well. Give me another minute to get the door open.” Taylish said, taking the stairs down, not calling out for everyone to freeze. The people after Daniel seemed very determined and he didn't want to distract his lover and get him hurt.

Maybe it was people from Daniel's past that had come to cause problems. Taylish had never been murderous in his life, not really. If someone from that gang came for Daniel; he'd kill them.

When he got to the door, there was a solid metal handled mop put through the door handles. He pulled it out and threw both the doors open with a flourish. Thoughts of Daniel had already fought to the surface of his mental process, Daniel kissing his neck, both of them sweaty, using the back of a patrol car as a bed, and well, there hadn't been that many people outside the bar when he'd gone in.

Bright spot lights hit his face and he threw his hands up to block them. Cops, uniformed and wearing riot gear ran by him on both sides, and his stomach dropped. So many bad ideas all one after another. He spun.

There was Daniel on the bar, holding his staff in both hands, light around him as if he were a red headed angel there, hair clinging to his cheeks. Tee-shirt wet and clinging to the curves of his muscular body, blue jeans dark and wet, perfect legs, and god, Taylish wanted those strong legs wrapped around his waist, holding him. The riot crew's entrance had stopped the brawl and started a rat scramble for exits. Daniel stood where he was, frozen there with his stick in his hands.

Gravity pulled Taylish, back through the confusion, and up onto the bar. His first step was loud against the polished wood and Daniel flinched, looking for some possible attacker. “Daniel.”

Relief softened Daniel's face and Taylish was there, a hand sliding down his cheek before he had a chance to say anything. His face was so soft under Taylish's hand as the side of his thumb moved over his cheekbone, down to where there was just enough red stubble to need to be shaved. Daniel's eyes were emerald, so rare and sometimes Taylish imagined they still tracked him, watched him. Both of them were wet, but Daniel's body was hot enough to warm Taylish through their wet clothes.

Daniel trembled as Taylish pulled him close. Confusion and chaos rained around them. The sprinklers shut off as Taylish caressed his cheek against Daniel's cheek, warm and life.

"Have you come to arrest me," Daniel asked, voice a whisper against Taylish's cheek. "Are you going to put me handcuffs?"

His voice didn't have the slightest fear in it, instead it was sultry, low, inviting, and Taylish's body responded hard. His fingers caressed down Daniel's bare arms, bringing his wrists together and holding them across each other. "Oh yeah, have to put you in half cuffs and strip search you. Daniel, where did you learn to fight like that?"

"Aki no Tenshi," Daniel whispered back, pressing his body closer, hard to hard. "You might have to be rough with me, show me how powerful you are."

"Oh man," Taylish groaned, and their words disappeared into a kiss. Bigger than Daniel, it was still Taylish's turn to tremble, arms wrapped around his lover. Daniel pulled at his lips with his own. The tip of his tongue traced along Taylish's and then pushed into him, circling, owning the kiss. Innocence and spice, Daniel's kiss stole Taylish's breath as the red head bit softly at his lips between dancing with his tongue. The art of kissing woke in Taylish something more primal and less skilled, until he had bore down, taking Daniel's mouth with his own, filling his smaller lover's mouth with his need and worry and pride and a kiss that left no room for breath. He was shaking as he pulled back, his Daniel held tight in his arms. "I love you, Daniel."

"I love you too," Daniel replied, fingers trying to caress the strong hand holding his wrists.

"Excuse me," Peace said, interrupting, irritated. "I think I'm about to be arrested. Perhaps you could take just a moment and tell this very nice officer that I'm your father."

Taylish grinned down from the bar at his father, who was probably wearing more alcohol than he'd ever consumed in his life. "Hi Dad," Taylish said, grinning. "Out for a walk were you?"

Peace's eyes tracked up and down his son, over skin tight shiny pants that were probably labeled 'product of Hell' somewhere, and the shirt that didn't reach down over all his ribs, the blue eyeshadow and flush color in

his cheeks. Pastor Morgan's eyes twitched. Between clenched teeth he said, "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"So," Sargent Mays said, looking from one Morgan to the other, "Detective. Morgan, is this your father?"

"Yup, Pastor Peace Morgan," Taylish said, refusing to let go of Daniel, almost proud of offending his father's ideas of public behavior.

"And yes, that is my son," Peace said, glaring. "He doesn't come to church often enough."

"I'm going to have to issue him a citation for disturbing the peace. Capt. says everyone gets them. Is this your husband?"

"Yup," Taylish said, rubbing Daniel's shoulder lightly, hoping that they'd both get to stay front to front because while Daniel's jeans might hide what was evident when they touched there, Taylish's stretchy shiny pants wouldn't hide it at all.

"One of the girls we picked up said he was defending her. I thought he was blind."

"He is. Doesn't seem to slow him down much," Taylish admitted. "Pastor Morgan and Daniel were clearly just defending themselves."

"Yeah, and Daniel defended himself so well one of the guys has a broken rib. He's already admitted that he was trying to clobber Daniel, so I don't think there will be any charges from that. Detective Morgan, your family is really something."

"Aren't they though?" Taylish asked with a laugh. "Are they getting arrested?"

"Oh good Lord," Peace said. "It's Sunday morning."

"I suppose it is," Sargent Mays said. "I ought to show up just to see how you explain this to your flock."

"Hey! Whatever was going on, I'm sure they had a good reason for being here!"

"That is correct," Peace said firmly. "We came here to help a young woman in trouble. It is not our fault that the gentleman she was with proved unpleasant."

"There you go then," Sargent Mays said, "Get out of here before I hear something I will have to arrest you for."

Taylish jumped to the floor, then reached back for Daniel, his hands following up his legs so that Daniel could reach for him. Daniel put his

hands on Tay's shoulders and Tay pulled him off into his arms. "I'm all for that. Dad?"

"I really think some of these people might need help still. There was a lot of anger. I'd like to stay and invite them to church. Taylish you should come. You as well, Daniel."

"Sorry, Dad, just finished a long case, have a football game to watch and another this afternoon. But we'll see you later. And Dad, careful, uh?"

"I am always careful," Pastor Morgan said. "Sargent Mays, will you be off in time to come to church this morning?"

"Oh now, see I don't know. It depends on how long it takes to book everyone that resisted," Sargent Mays said as he was lead away by Peace Morgan, an arm around his shoulder. "What's the sermon on this morning?"

"The futility of violence," Pastor Morgan said, grinning back at Taylish for a moment.

"Where is Peace going?" Daniel asked, lacing his fingers with Taylish's

"I believe he's going to go witness to the people who just tried to break a few bottles over his head. I think he may have enjoyed himself," Taylish said.

Hand in hand, they left the bar, making their way towards the corner. Maya caught up with them and Tay gave back the infrared gear he'd been using, and talked her out of a pair of handcuffs. Their partnership worked on many levels, but she was definitely the keeper of equipment.

Quietly, Taylish and Daniel got around the corner and closer to their apartment. "Is it morning?"

"Almost," Taylish said, "The sky is a little lighter."

"What color is it?" Daniel laid his head against Taylish's shoulder. "Is there pink?"

Taylish looked to the east, over the top of Daniel's head. "Just buildings. I can't really see the sunrise. Maybe from our balcony. Did you get hurt?"

"No. You mad at me?"

"Might be later," Taylish admitted. "You were very hot, up there on the bar. I really didn't know you could fight like that."

They reached the where the sidewalk turned towards their apartment. "I didn't either," Daniel admitted, "But it worked."

"It did. Don't do it again," Taylish said, opening their door.

"I'll stay home if you will. You going to rough me up a little, officer," Daniel asked, moving in behind Taylish, a hand sliding down the zipper of Taylish's pants, thumb rubbing over the hard member under the thin material. "Strip search me?"

Taylish turned and the door closed under his hand, as he pushed Daniel up against it, pinning him. He shivered, one hand sliding into Daniel's still wet hair as he trailed kisses across on cheekbone then the other. "There is lure to that, to fucking you hard with your hands cuffed behind your back," Taylish said, one hand returning Daniel's caress only taking it further, sliding easily into his jeans. The caress wasn't rough or demanding though. It was gentle, reverent. "But I want something more right now. Do you know how important you are to me?"

"Uh," Daniel said, mind not quiet in gear as he pressed forward into Taylish's hand. "Let's fuck now, talk later."

"No," Taylish said, peeling Daniel's stick out of his and setting it in the corner with his lighter one. "No, I don't want to fuck you."

"Yes, you do," Daniel insisted, an edge of neediness in his voice. "Are you angry at me now?"

"No," Taylish said, and he realized he'd never be angry at Daniel over this. "I am not angry. And shit, you have to teach me how to do that with a stick, how you knew where they were in the dark, but not right now. Right now, I want you to come out here into the middle of the room. Don't count the steps, just trust me? I want you to dance with me?"

"I trust you," Daniel said, slightly defensive. "What if I want you to be rough with me? What if I want that?"

"Well, we can do that too," Taylish said, drawing Daniel's fingers, which had gone stiff, to feel the smile on his lips. "I'll even spank you! But not right now. Right now, I want something else."

"What do you want?"

"You'll see," Taylish said, slipping his hands under Daniel's shirt, "Lift your arms. I'm going to make you naked and tell you how exciting it was to see you on that bar."

"You could see me? I thought the lights went out?" Daniel wiggled out of his shirt, goose bumps scattering everywhere that Taylish touched.

"Had infrared gear, and yes, I could see you. You looked so powerful. I got hard just watching you move. And I need to tell you I'm sorry too,"

Taylish said, words a warm breath against Daniel's chilled throat leaving more goosebumps as he moved over to the muscled curve of a shoulder. "I'm sorry, Daniel, for not realizing how you really can take care of yourself. I just, it's just that you're so important to me and I know I'd be so lame if I lost my sight. I know life hasn't been real easy to you and I guess I was just afraid that something could happen to you. Maybe it's just that you're so important to me. I was so lonely before you came into my life."

"I'm so hard and I want you to fuck me, please? I need you to," Daniel said, unfastening his jeans and shoving them down. He wore nothing under them except his desire for his love.

"I want to make love to you," Taylish said. "I want to be as naked with you in my heart as I can be in body."

"Aren't we always," Daniel asked reaching forward with both hands, following Taylish's voice. "I'm going to catch you and get your cock between my teeth and you'll forget all about doing things slow."

Without reply, now bared feet silent on the hardwood floor, Taylish moved to turn on the Celtic cd he'd played when he was home last time. In the very sparsely furnished apartment, the music echoed and flowed. There were two candles on either side of the stereo and Taylish lit them both. As he moved back to Daniel who had stopped in the middle of the room, naked, red hair drying and curling a little at the ends, Taylish stopped and watched the miracle that was his husband.

From what he'd found out about Daniel's past, the beautiful red head shouldn't have been sane, really, let alone so very competent and loving. "Where do you like me to touch you best?"

"I like everywhere you touch me," Daniel said, turning in the direction of Taylish's voice. "I like it best if you do touch me. Or do you want to see me touch myself?"

Naked as well, Taylish walked slowly all the way around Daniel. He pulled the ponytail holder from his hair and tossed it towards the couch. "You seem disappointed. Did you really want me to arrest you and fuck you on the hood of a patrol car?"

"Maybe," Daniel hedged, "Maybe I'm just fucking twisted and broken too. We can do it your way."

Taylish considered. He'd had what he wanted to do so clear in his mind, to worship Daniel with kisses and touches and make love to him so

slowly. They could write books about what he didn't know about sexuality though and what he really wanted was to make Daniel feel good, really good. "It's better if we do it how we both want. Put your wrists behind your back, Daniel Morgan. You are under arrest. Do you want me to read you your rights?"

There was a tremble of excitement that went through Daniel, a shiver over his shoulders and his cock twitched, and Taylish didn't understand, but he liked it. Daniel placed both wrists behind his back and moved slightly from one foot to the other. "What rights? What have I done?"

"Well, Mr. Morgan," Taylish said as he carefully put the cuffs around Daniel's wrists. "I have to arrest you for reckless incitement of an officer of the law. I may need to do a body cavity search. Have you ever had a body cavity search, Mr. Morgan?" Taylish asked, finding himself much more excited because of Daniel's excitement. He caressed slowly down the shivering curve of Daniel's ass, moving between his legs to push them apart a little, then to press the side of his hand between where ball sack and anus were. "I urge you to cooperate, Mr. Morgan. You're not embarrassed by being seen completely naked by an officer of the law, are you?"

"I'm not hiding anything, Officer," Daniel said, wrists working at the cuffs. "My hole is too small to hide anything in!"

"Oh really?" Taylish said, one hand holding the chain between the cuffs, the thumb of his other hand pressing small circles against Daniel's tight entrance. They were always careful and while Taylish had thought some things must grow looser with time, Daniel was as tight as when he'd first met him, though he never had any trouble entering him either. "It seems you might be a virgin. You realize that this is against the law in our living room? I will need to take care of that for you."

Daniel wiggled his hips, moving deeper into the roll that Taylish hadn't expected. "Oh please, don't! I'm saving my virginity for the man I love! Please don't touch me there!"

Taylish knew he ought to feel uncomfortable, or at least he thought he ought to, but as he pulled a slightly struggling Daniel back against him, pressing his hard and very ready cock between his love's legs, all he felt was excitement. "Daniel," he whispered in his ear, "Is this what you want? God, you excite me so much? I love you so very much!"

“Yes, this is what I want. Force me to lay down on the bed, and tell me that you're going to take my ass as your own, no matter what I say. You're okay too? It really excites you?”

“OH yeah, but promise you'll say if anything doesn't feel right.” Taylish pleaded, turning his love around so they were face to face, “Dance with me for a song, just please?”

“Sure,” Daniel said, swaying to the upbeat Celtic song, chest pressed to Taylish's “You smell so good. I love the smell of your sweat.” He licked Taylish's chest then, still dancing, but leaning a little so he could circle one pink nipple. “You taste good too.”

Taylish pulled him back and wrapped his arms around him. The song played around them. The candle casting shadows around them that Daniel couldn't see, but it was vanilla scent and Taylish just wanted this safe moment of the two of them, slow dancing. As the song ended, Taylish was sure he could feel Daniel's heart speed up. It was likely something else or he imagined it, but he was also ready to give Daniel what he seemed to want.

“I taste good? Oh yeah,” Taylish said with a groan, “Well, if you don't want me to take that sweet little virgin ass of yours for myself, maybe you better see what you can do about this hardon of mine.”

Daniel whimpered, a mock fearful submission as he kissed down Taylish's chest. Hands cuffed behind him, he took the head of Taylish's cock easily, sucking him in deep, truly trying to bring Taylish to orgasm, just as he would if their little game had been real. It took only moments of that for Taylish to be seeing white and wanting to thrust for all he was worth.

“Stop,” he groaned, fingers combing through Daniel's hair, “Love, stop, or I'll come. And I haven't given you a body cavity search yet.”

“But I'm doing good, right? You don't need my virginity!”

Taylish reached down and took Daniel by the arms. Maybe it's something primal in a man that makes him want to dominate and possess his lover. “Oh, but I do. And I'm going to keep you for myself. I don't think I can live without you. And, now I'm going to take you into an interrogation room and search you. No matter how you resist, I'm going to have your ass.”

“Oh yes, Tay, take me!” Daniel said, and his words just sounded passionate to Taylish.

Taylish turned him around and cock between his legs still, he walked him forward their bedroom. “Don't be afraid. I'll try to be gentle with you, beautiful one.”

The mock struggles did something right to Taylish's belly, made his cock weep with need, and he really just wanted to nuzzle Daniel's neck and sink into him, but the scene was important and Daniel was still very much into it.

“Where are you taking me?”

“To a special interrogation room, where we take virginities. It's sound proof and once I lock the door, no one can help you.”

“Don't stop, Tay, more,” Daniel whimpered as his legs reached the bed. “Are you going to tie me up?”

“If I have to! Virgins can't be allowed to wander the streets,” Taylish said, searching for a reason for the game they were playing. “They attract dragons. Crawl onto the table and spread your legs.”

“Are you going to take photos of me?” Daniel asked, hips swaying as he moved forward on his knees. “I don't want anyone to know!”

“Oh yes, we're going to take photos of you,” Taylish said, grabbing a pillow really quick and putting it where Daniel was about to lay, so it would be under his belly. “And when I'm done fucking you and my cum is dripping out of your little pucker, I'm gonna take more photos. Evidence, you see, proving that you were deflowered, by law.” He brushed hair back from Daniel's face too, as he moved to the head of the bed to get their lub.

Daniel kissed his hand when it moved by. “This is so hot, Tay!”

“Begging will not help you,” Taylish said, trying to sound stern, but really feeling very pleased with himself for turning Daniel on so much. “I will prepare you for the deflowering now. Spread your legs, Virgin.”

“Will it hurt? What are you doing?”

“I'm putting on gloves now,” Taylish lied. “And then I will insert one finger into you. One finger shouldn't hurt too much.”

Daniel whimpered and moved higher up on his knees, his ass looking vulnerable and god so delicious. “Will just one finger be enough? Then we're done? I have gotten hard. You wouldn't tell anyone?”

“Of course I will. I'm going to take lots of photos,” Taylish promised sliding one lubed finger into the tight ring of muscle that was Daniel's entrance. “Do you want me to show all my buddies?”

“No, please don't show anyone! I shouldn't be so turned on by this!”

“Yes, you should! You're my love and you'll always get hard when I'm about to take you,” Taylish said, proudly, possessively, as he slide two fingers into his prisoner. “Daniel, I want to be in you, can I now, please? This is fun. We can do more later. Maybe I'll get hard again.”

“Tay,” Daniel said affectionately. “Take me now. Hold me.”

“You're so beautiful, just you, not the way you look, but you.” Taylish quickly coated his cock with lub as well and was into Daniel before he'd finished speaking. He rolled them onto their sides, the heat that was Daniel around him like a silky glove, gliding, over and back all the sensitive spots a man has when he's that hard.

Strong arms around Daniel, holding him close, face hidden against Daniel's neck, he stroked until all he saw was white and his body sank down into the pinpoint of his being as he released into Daniel. He heard the cry, deep and passionate, but it was only as he sank back from the peak that he realized it was his own cry. He kissed Daniel's shoulder, to the edge and back down to his spine.

As the light receded, Taylish reached down to see if Daniel had come too and found that he hadn't. “Sorry! I came too soon.”

Daniel rolled, and reached up to touch Taylish's face. “Shhhh, don't say things like that. You come perfectly and you're just not done.”

“Hey! How did you get out of the handcuffs?”

After a dismissive sound, Daniel reached back and got them off his other wrist too. “They're just handcuffs, Tay. They haven't made a pair of those that could hold me since I needed to shave. Blow me?”

Their kisses were tender, short, candy kisses, and then Taylish was able to worship Daniel as he'd wanted, moving those teasing kisses down his chest, over his belly, as one hand cupped Daniel's balls. Truthfully, Daniel didn't take long to come either, but it was as if he were waiting for Taylish's mouth to encase him, licking and pulling and he spilled his pearls.

Daniel's cries were just as passionate as Taylish's had been, but quieter. Release with Taylish was always so much more intimate than anything

before, more than even his own masturbation, like release was a promise from the universe that he was loved. That feeling was so intense this time, that he cried as he came, tears flowing down into his hair. "Taylish! You do love me, right? You'll never stop because I do stupid things?"

First he licked up the last bit of come from Daniel's slowly softening cock, then he moved to pull his into his arms. "I will love you always, Daniel. Why did you go there in the first place?"

"There was a girl. The mother, she came ask you to help get her daughter back from the bar, and I just wanted to be, I just wanted to do it myself. She hugged me and it was like she was my mother for a moment. I'm not helpless. You didn't need to get your dad to stay with me, you know?"

"I'm sorry. I know now. I just, Daniel, you really are important to me and I get afraid for myself, more than what you can and can't do, but wow, you really can lay to with that stick of yours. How did you know where they were?"

"There were just things I could hear about them all. I was very focused. I don't know how I did it, but I was afraid they'd kill me if they got hold of me."

"You're so brave," Taylish said then kissed Daniel's shoulder, before reaching for the blanket at the foot of their bed. "You going to foot ball with me after we sleep?"

"Sure," Daniel said, taking hold of Taylish's hand and pulling his arm around him. "First, though, I haven't been to sleep yet."

Later, when Taylish woke to a soft knock on their door, he slipped from bed and grabbed gray sweat pants from the dresser by their bed room door. Out the peep hole there was a prim black woman holding an aluminum foil wrapped plate. It smelled like chicken and Taylish opened the door a bit. "Can I help you?"

"You're the cop, aren't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he said, opening the door a little. "Are you the lady who spoke with Daniel earlier?"

"Yes, Sir," she said, looking at the floor again for a moment, before pushing the plate towards him. "I'm real sorry. I didn't mean to get him into trouble. I didn't know he was blind. I was just so upset and it was dark then, but my girl says he saved her life. She was real scared and then he

was there. She said he defended her against that nasty man and his friends. I think she's going to stay doing right now. You'll tell him I said I was grateful, please? And I'm real sorry if he got hurt or anything. I made you all chicken."

Taylish made a mental note to be sure to introduce Maya to this nice lady. She was so sweetly Southern that Taylish wasn't quite sure what to say. "Thank you very much for the chicken. You just let us know if you need anything, okay?" Plate in one hand, he held out his other hand to shake, and saw her eyes hit the black nail polish and look back to his face, which, he expected still had some eyeshadow and mascara on. "Don't mind the make up. It's just for work."

"You are a police officer, right?"

"Yup, It was very nice to meet you now."

She nodded and smiled as he closed the door.

Daniel was in the door, leaning, arms across his chest as Taylish peeled the foil back. "Smells good. Football and chicken, Love?"

"Sounds good to me!"

And it was a very lovely Sunday.

## Cigarette Smoke

by Nix Winter

Warnings: This story contains a flashback from Daniel's childhood. It's short, emotional, and rather dark. Being alive though means a person can heal and Taylish does love Daniel very much.

He knew it was coming. It felt like a shadow slowly growing to cover the back of his head, to swallow his soul and there was nothing to be done. He held onto the shirt he was folding, the soft cotton of Taylish's tee-shirt in his fingers. He pulled it to his face, hiding in the fluffy scent of the fabric softener, hiding from the acrid smoke that he didn't really believe was in their apartment.

And he didn't escape and the flashback had him.

Cigarette smoke clung to the sheets and to him. He hid his eyes against his arm, and the smell of cigarette was thick. A curtain of hair, obscenely red, brassy, golden, lay over his arm hiding his face.

“Are you still crying?”

“No,” he lied through swollen lips. The evening sunlight lay golden over his floor, making his sheets glow. He imagined they were like the angels in his current game, bright and sparkling and they'd come if he called them.

But it wasn't a video game and there was no escape from the hand sliding down his bare ass, tracing a track between the bright red circles zig-zagging down the firm curve of his backside. “Only two more to go, Daniel.”

“Please,” he whispered, knowing it wouldn't help, wishing. “Please, don't.”

“Oh so pretty,” the man said, the warm end of his cigarette butt sliding through the same path his finger just had. “Get the pillow, put it under your hips, honey.”

“Glen,” he whispered, moving graceful and seductive by nature, as he got on of his pillows and positioned himself, ass in the air, hands holding fist-fulls of sheets. “I’ll be good. I’ll be really good. Let me do it? I’ll do it myself.”

“Oh but honey, you wouldn’t hold it long enough,” Glen said, voice kind. The cigarette butt trailed down between the valley between Daniel’s ass. “Turn your head so I can see you. God you’ve got pretty eyes! Someday, I’m going to buy you completely and it wouldn’t be your ass we play with.”

The other end of the cigarette touched Daniel’s skin and white-hot light flashed in his mind. The cigarette smoke was real. The tee shirt twisted in his hands and he backed away from the clothes basket, torn between the dark world of his present and watching the glowing red end of the cigarette against his skin.

Burning, smoke, cigarette, and silent as a mouse he backed and backed, until the wall had him, the corner of the room imprisoned him. Tears ran down his face from sightless eyes. The pain from the past went forward like a movie he couldn’t stop watching. Screaming, crying, and alone, on the floor of his room. His leg had hurt too much to move, and banging his head on the wall slightly, he tried to remind himself, it was over.

It was a long time gone. He was safe. But there was cigarette smoke in the house. Someone could be here to hurt them. Someone found them. Glen found him. It didn’t make sense. He knew it wasn’t coherent. Taylish. Taylish. And his mind just locked into that track, terror rocking him back and forth.

“Daniel? Daniel! What’s wrong?” Taylish asked, but when he reached out, there between his fingers, hard and round and slightly rough at the end. The stink of the smoke was so thick.

“Please don’t hurt me! Please! I’ll be good!”

“Daniel, what is it? What happened? Daniel? It’s me, Tay.”

“Don't burn me, please!”

“Oh god,” Taylish said, and the window opened with a swoosh. “I'm sorry, Daniel! It was just a bad day. Maya about got shot today and I was just stressed out. Shit! I'm sorry. I just wanted a couple cigarettes to calm my nerves. Shit, shit.”

Daniel sank down to the floor, pulling his knees close, rocking still, tears wetting his jeans. “My fault. It's my fault. I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Not your fault.”

“Oh my fuck me. I have to shower, get rid of the smoke. I'll be right back Daniel, I promise. Wait for me, believe in me. I love you, very much. I'll never hurt you.”

Taylish stepped back, a hand over his face, his heart torn. Someone somewhere had hurt his Daniel, bad. And he loved him, loved this shaking and sobbing man curled up in the corner.

Fast, leaving his clothes on the floor he threw himself in the shower and washed away his cigarette smoke. He'd never touch them again. Ever. He didn't have time to cry himself, just grabbed a towel and kicked his clothes over by the garbage.

Wearing a towel he moved to the clean clothes and got himself a pair of sweat pants and a loose tee-shirt.

“Daniel?”

“I'm sorry, Tay. I'm sorry. It's not your fault. I'm just broken.” Daniel was still trying to climb farther into the corner and he flinched when Taylish touched his arm.

“It's gone, the cigarette. No one will burn you, ever. I promise. Daniel, let me hold you?”

“Just leave me alone,” Daniel said, face pressed to the wall.

“You've been alone too long. I need to hold you. Please let me?”

Taylish ran his fingers along the edge of Daniel's hand and then they connected, Daniel taking his hand and holding on for dear life. Easily,

Taylish slipped an arm under Daniel's knees and one behind his back and lifted him.

“Daniel Morgan,” he said, caressing Daniel's forehead with his cheek. “You are not broken. You are so strong and brave and I'm so glad you're here with me.”

“But I cry and I'm stupid. I can't tell the past from now.”

“I'll help you,” Taylish promised, “and you'll help me.”

The chair was thick and warm, the big brown leather easy chair. Taylish sat down and pulled Daniel close, shifting him just a little. “A little better now?”

“A little,” Daniel said, deeply embarrassed. Hard flashbacks had hit him only three times since they'd been married, but they were getting more frequent, he feared. “What if I'm not sane? You can divorce me if you want.”

“Never,” Taylish promised, rubbing Daniel's back in comforting motions. “You are not insane. Damn, whatever happened to you, do you think it would have affected me different? Do you think I'd be all just fine if someone had done that to me?”

“I wouldn't let them!” Daniel nearly screamed, both arms around Taylish's neck, holding him tight. “I wouldn't let anyone hurt you. I love you. I would do anything to protect you. They can't find us. We're safe. And that can't happen to you.”

“Daniel, shhhhh, it's okay. We are safe. Everything is safe, Daniel. And it's okay to remember things. That's what happened, isn't it? You remembered something bad?”

“Yes,” Daniel whispered.

“Loren said this might happen remember? That the safer you felt that you'd start to remember things?”

“I don't want to.”

“Then you don't got to. No one is going to make you, but if you do, then

I'll be here with you.”

“I'll wear you out. I'm not worth your time.”

“Daniel, put your hands on my face.”

Daniel sat up a little more and shaking fingers touched Taylish's face, fingers on his lips, another hand on his cheek, feeling the movement of his face.

“Now listen to me clearly, feel my lips, feel that I'm not lying. I need you, Daniel. I love you. I feel happy when I know you're here. You are everything to me. What happened wasn't your fault and it wasn't okay. You are innocent and I love you.”

Daniel's face clenched up, eyes squeezed tight as tears rolled down his face. “I love you too!”

And it was better, not perfect, but better. Taylish held him, humming softly. They were safe, were together, hands together, until sleep eventually took them both, right there in the big chair.

Okay. So that's it for this book \*smiles\* Email me! Let me know what you think?

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